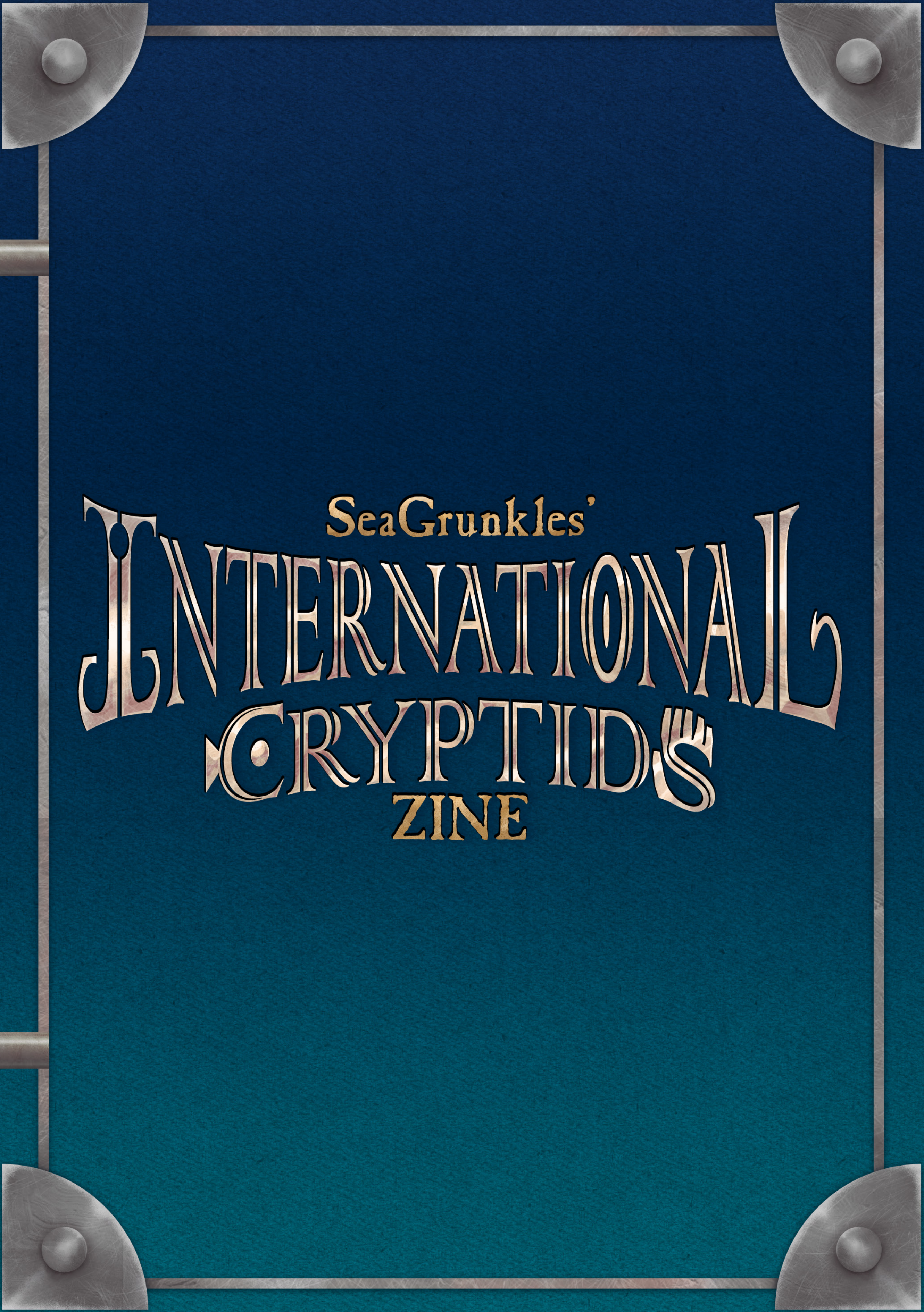

SeaGrunkles'

INTERNATIONAL CRYPTIDS

ZINE

SeaGrunkles'

INTERNATIONAL CRYPTIDS

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(Unofficial)

Record of International Travel

Stanford Pines
and
Stanley Pines

Rock Candy

Author: Cait | *Spots:* Vic

Stan let out a groan, bracing his lower back with a fist as he stood up from where he had been crouched over the riverbank. The small trowel in hand brushed against his jacket in the movement, while a hand-held, custom-modified metal detector sat uselessly in his other.

Ford glanced up at him from the opposite side of the river, using his hand to shield his eyes from the glare of the sun. “We’ve collected nearly enough parts, I think,” he said sympathetically.

Stan just glared back. “I’m fine.” He shoved the trowel into his jacket pocket and continued sweeping the muddy bank, turning his back on Ford.

Ford shrugged, opting to keep the peace rather than pick a fight with his brother. He continued his own search, keeping his eyes peeled for the tell-tale *blip* that signaled a potential treasure.

The twins were searching the ravine under the bridge that led into Gravity Falls, seeking technology that had fallen from the crash-landed alien spacecraft all those centuries before. Fiddleford had promised that, if they could obtain a few more bits and bobs, he could upgrade the engine on their ship to run on some sort of continuously-renewing energy source, which would significantly cut down on the cost of their impending adventure.

Ford had several small metal pieces rattling around in his knapsack. Stan, on the other hand, had... one. Ford glanced surreptitiously at his brother, taking in the scowl on his face and the aggressive way he jerked the metal detector across the sodden earth.

As he turned back to his task, Ford’s eye fell on the stones scattered near the river. He scooped one from the ground, worn smooth from years of rushing water. He felt its weight in his palm, testing it gently before flicking his wrist. The stone sailed out into the water and skipped once, twice, thrice before landing at his brother’s feet.

Stan looked up, his eyes crinkling as he grinned. “Oh, yeah?” he asked, stooping to snatch up a stone of his own. “Betcha I can make five skips.”

“You’re on.”

Ford watched the frustration melt away from his brother as they splashed in the river, skipping stones and laughing. Stan did manage to make five skips with his third rock, and Ford upped the stakes to six.

After botching a throw, Stan splashed his way over to Ford's side of the riverbank, claiming it had a better angle for the stones to hit the water. Ford lined up his next toss, and Stan nudged him with his shoulder.

"Stanley, no cheating!" Ford chastised, his laughter undercutting his complaint.

Stan mocked his tone. "Stan-Leeee," he drawled, bending to select another rock as Ford's throw went astray. "Watch this one, Poindext—woah!"

Ford's attention was immediately on Stanley's hand. The rock he had picked up, a seemingly innocuous river stone, appeared to weakly shiver before tiny cracks appeared in its surface. Blue light faintly shone out of the hairline fractures, and Stan abruptly dropped the stone.

"Stanley!" Ford admonished, instinctively reaching out a hand to snatch the stone out of the air.

"Be careful, Ford," Stanley warned warily, his hand going to the knife strapped to his belt. "You don't know what that thing is."

"I do, actually," Ford huffed, shoving his glasses up his nose and turning the stone over. It fluttered in his hand, the hairline cracks appearing again. "I've read about it in one of the diaries I scavenged from the wrecked spacecraft."

Stan blinked at him.

"Of course you did," he replied flatly. "What the heck is it, then?"

Ford held it flat in his hand, the pulsing light casting spidery streaks across his broad palm. "A translator," he said. "Inside is some kind of... energy core, I suppose."

Stan reached out, and Ford relinquished the stone back to him. "It translates... languages?" He held the stone up at eye level. "How's it work?"

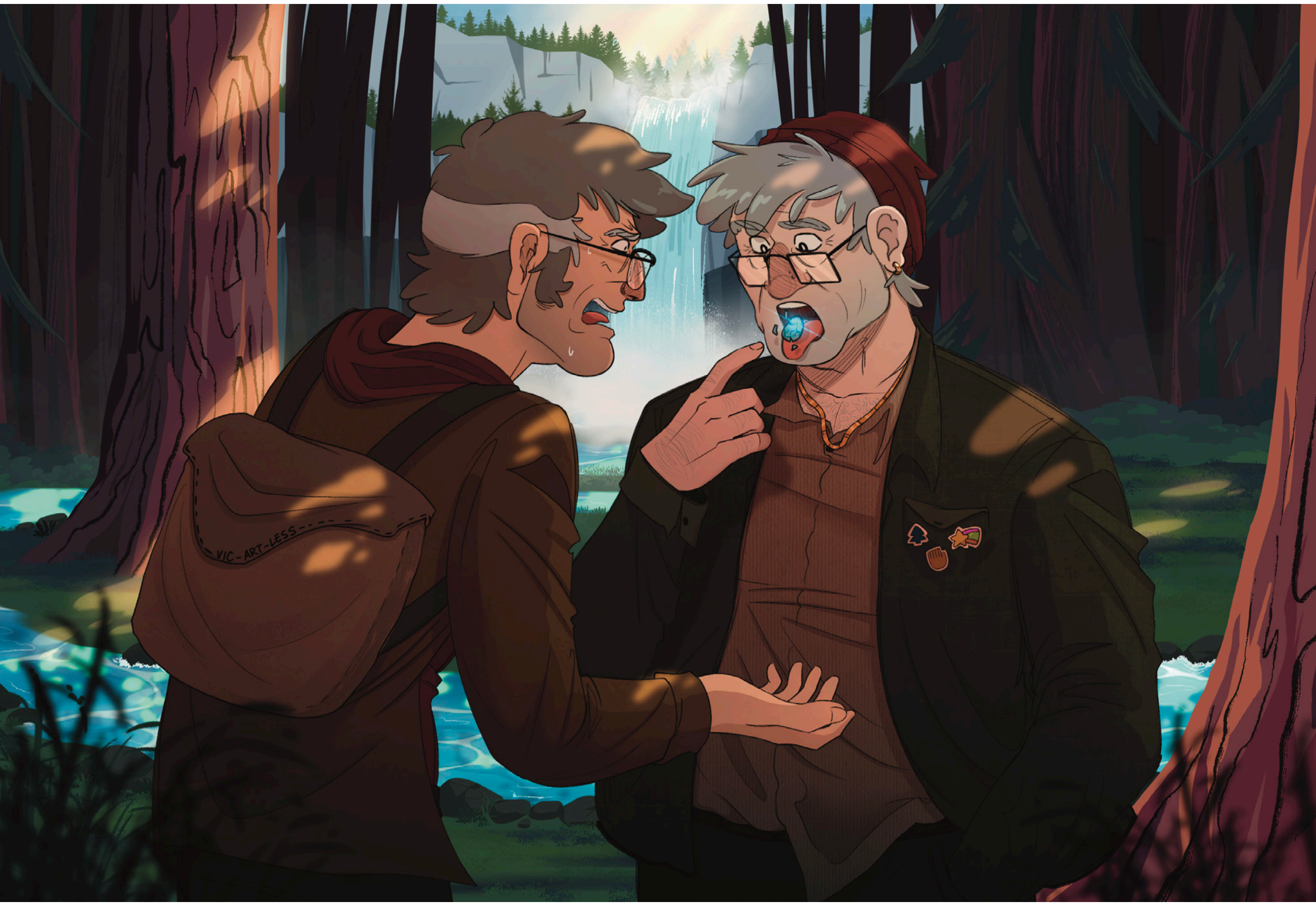
"When charged, it essentially... 'downloads' languages to your brain. If I recall correctly, the diary plans said something about heat activating the core. If you hold it more tightly in your hands—"

Stan swiftly popped the stone into his mouth, interrupting Ford's explanation.

"Stanley!"

Stan opened his mouth to reply, and Ford saw that the stone had splintered apart, the shards revolving around a glowing blue orb. "Spit that out at once!"

Stan let the stone roll from his tongue into his brother's waiting hands. "What? Language comes from the mouth, right? Plus, it's warm in there," he shrugged.

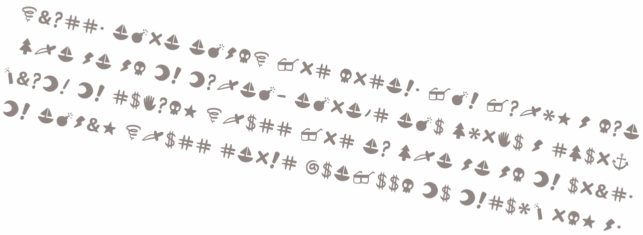


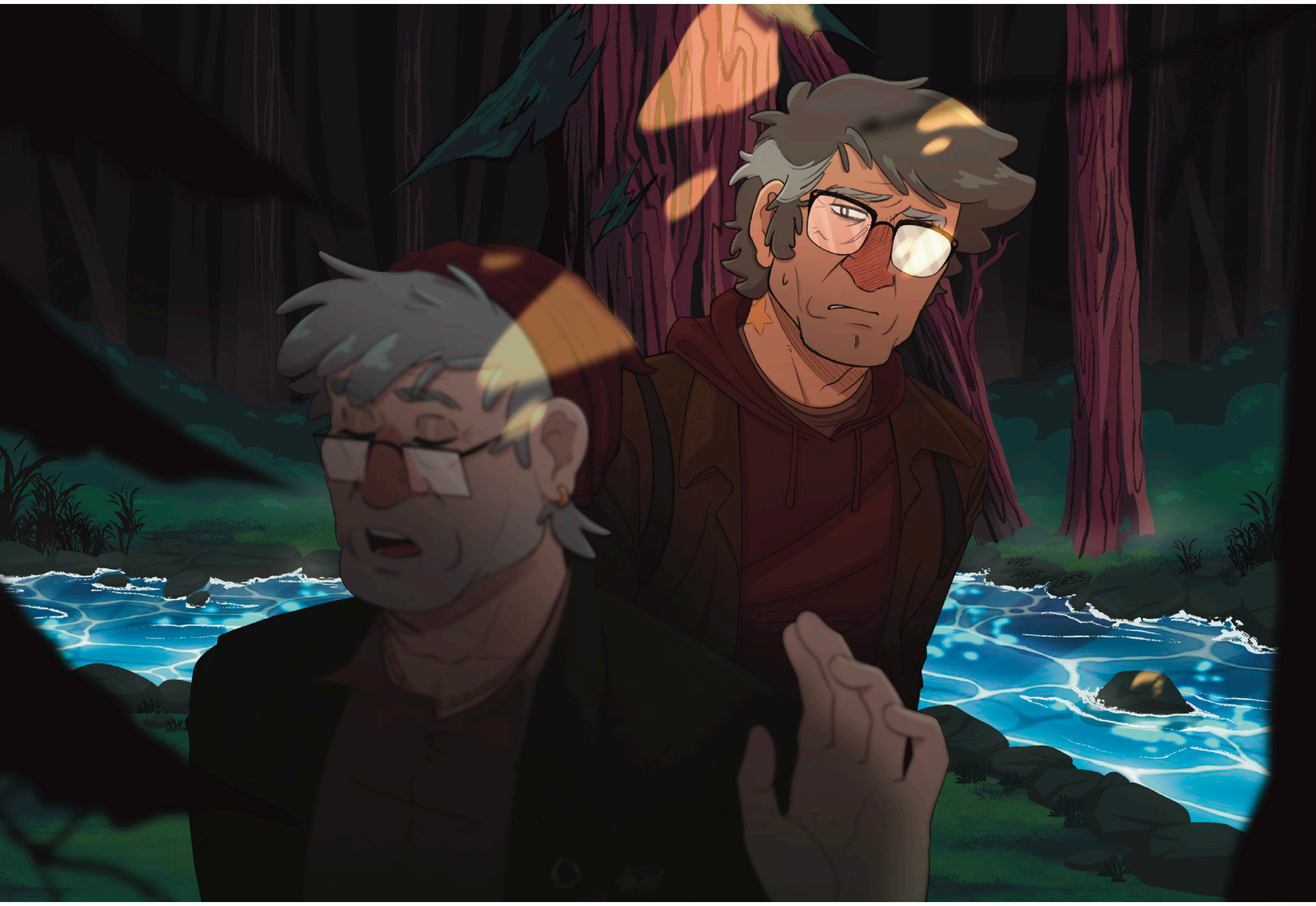
“First of all, that was highly unsanitary. You have no idea what sort of bacteria is living in this river!” Ford slipped the stone into the side pocket of his backpack. “Second of all—”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it, Six. I won’t put the rock in my mouth again. Cross my heart.”

Ford crossed his arms and breathed in deeply through his nose.

“Okay. Fine.” He rocked back on his heels, looking out at the setting sun. “Let’s head back. I’d like to do some experiments on that technology before we take it out into the middle of the ocean with us.”





“Alright, old pal, move those old bones and let’s get back to the Shack.” Stan hiked his backpack up onto his shoulder.

Ford paused, throwing a sidelong glance at Stan. “‘Old pal?’ Are you okay, Stanley? You’ve been acting strangely.” Ford’s gaze pierced his twin, as if he was trying to see directly into his brain.

Stan grunted noncommittally. “Nah, I’m fine. I’m just excited for the trip, is all. Keep your shorts on.”

Ford narrowed his eyes, but for once, he held his tongue. He resisted the urge to pull his journal out, opting instead to keep the peace with his brother as they carefully followed the winding river back into town.

As we move further and further from the events of Weirdmaggedon, Stanley is still showing some... quirks... in his personality. At first, I chalked them up to him still slowly regaining his memories; however, in recent weeks, I am beginning to become concerned.

Stanley has still been quite forgetful. This may be a side effect of the Memory Gun, but the things he forgets seem to be focused exclusively around our impending travels. I am not sure how exactly the Memory Gun alters the subject's mind, but it feels unlikely that it would target such a specific event, especially one that had not yet even been conceived upon its use.

Conversely, Stanley also appears to know things that he absolutely should **NOT.**

He has also mentioned several things that occurred during my time in the Shack prior to my portal research that I'm **QUITE** certain I didn't record in any of my journals. When asked about this knowledge, though, he simply shrugs and reminds me that he spent the better part of three decades pretending to be me.

Finally, and most terrifyingly when I am not expecting it, Stanley has been sleepwalking. I awoke last night to see him standing at the foot of my bed. He explained that he was just checking on a noise he had heard... but I heard no noise.

These incidents are beginning to escalate in frequency, and I am more than moderately concerned at this point. I am hoping that I will be able to find some answers on our travels. I think the stone we found today will prove quite useful in this endeavor. I have looked back at my previous research and found no warnings or anything indicating it may be dangerous.

I am ready to depart for our trip posthaste; hopefully Fiddleford will be able to modify our engine sooner than later.

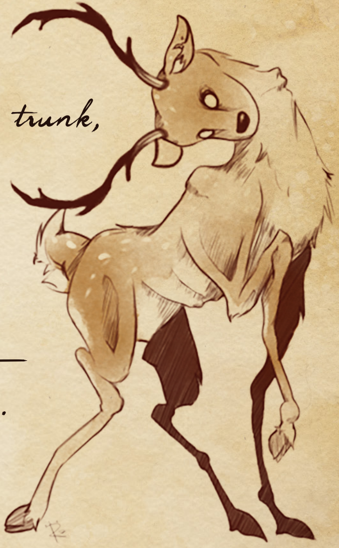
This morning we are traveling down the coast to California to visit Mabel and Dipper. We had a few days before our trip was scheduled to start, and I thought that perhaps spending time with the children would help Stanley's... memory issues. I will report back with my findings.

In the past two days, I think I consumed at least two ounces of glitter, but I enjoyed our visit tremendously. Dipper showed us the project he was working on for his extracurricular mathematics club. We met his lab partner, and I was pleased to see he appears to have a knack for collaborative thinking. Our timing was perfect to see Mabel's performance in her school play. In addition, she, er, "wowed" us all with her... inventive... cuisine. With her creativity, she reminds me of Stanley when we were kids. Over one such dinner, Dipper told us that we should consider changing our passwords to something stronger—he must have read an article online. Perhaps he will have a career in cybersecurity if ghost nabbing doesn't work out.

Speaking of Stanley, he seemed fine during our stay. Perhaps it was all in my head... the stresses of the boat repairs getting to me...

While on our journey, Stanley and I found ourselves in need of parts for a repair on the mechanical aspects of the ship. Fiddleford directed us to his family's old barn, which housed scraps from some of his pre-college experiments. Once there, we obtained the parts with little fanfare, but upon our return to the car, we were accosted by something I can identify only as...

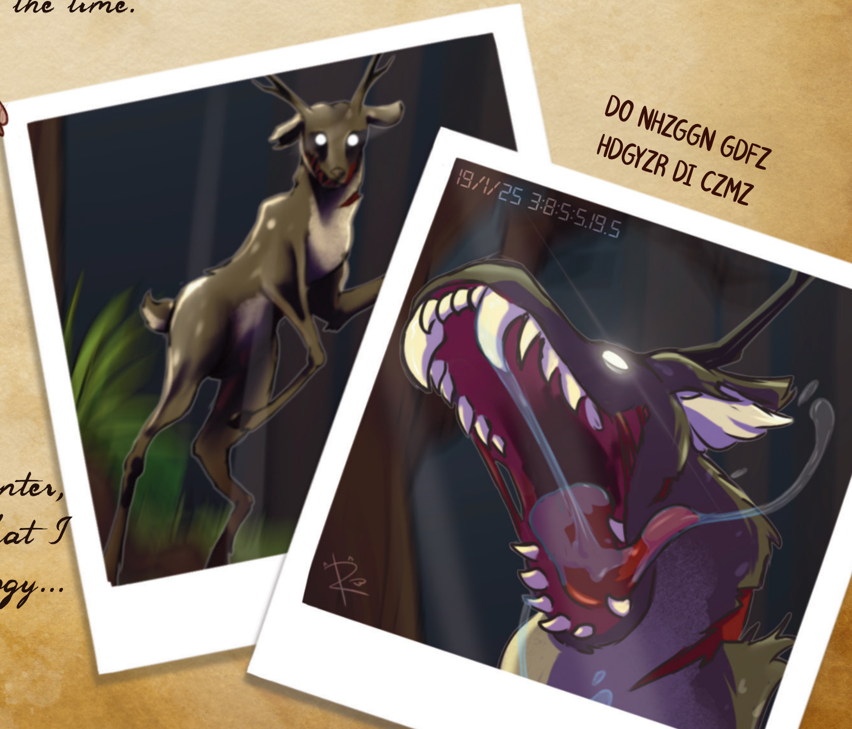
a Not Deer.



As we were loading the parts into the trunk, something that appeared to be a deer approached from the forest near the edge of the property. Stanley raised his camera, ostensibly to snap a photograph to show the children. However, when the camera flashed, the creature's eyes illuminated—predatory, like a wolf—and it stood on its back legs.

It only had time to take two halting steps forward before Stanley and I flung ourselves into the car and sped away.

During his time as my assistant in the Falls, Fiddleford warned me of such a creature: the appearance of a deer, but uncannily intelligent, with long limbs and forward-facing eyes. Of course, I found the idea preposterous at the time.



DO NHZGGN GDFZ
HDGYZR DI CZMZ

After this encounter, though, it would seem that I owe Fiddleford an apology...

The Great Lakes have much more to offer than I initially expected, especially Lake Erie. We stayed at a fine resort on the coast of the lake—Stanley called it his "**GREAT LAKE VACATION**"... rather overexaggerated, in my opinion.

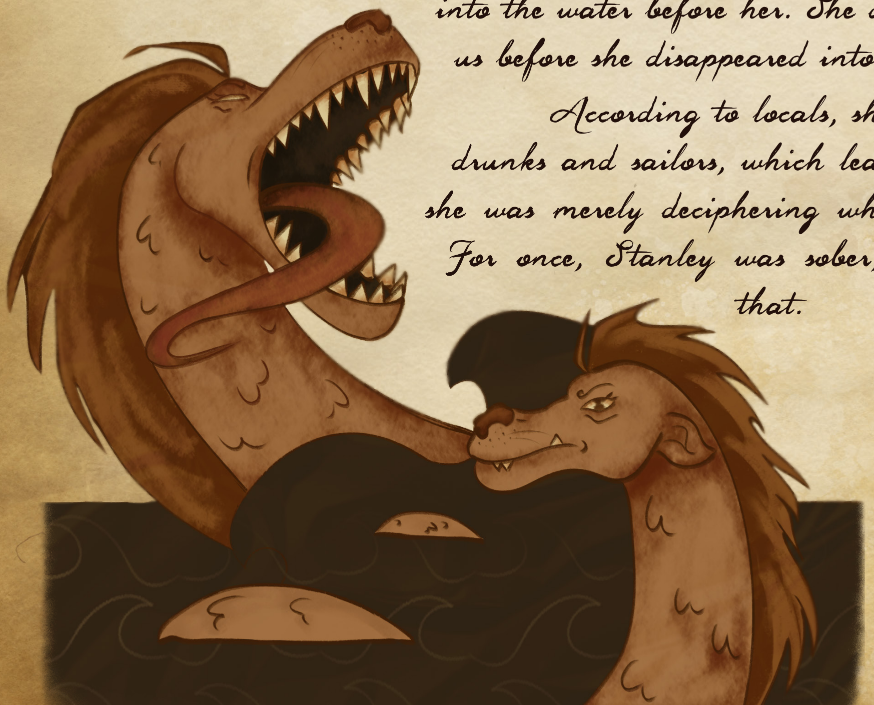
To my surprise, there seems to be a cryptid that lives within the lake...A sea serpent. Initially, I assumed it to be Nessie, the Loch Ness Monster. The locals, however, called the Loch Ness beast "**KNOCK OFF NESSIE**" and corrected me to the name...

Bessie.

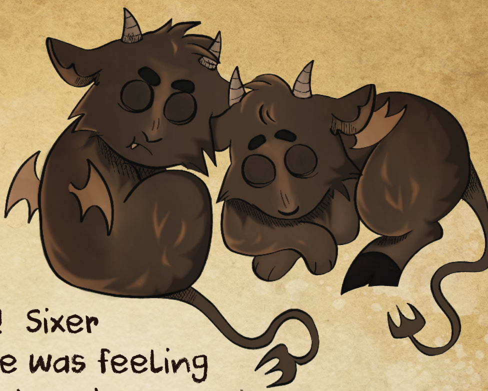
[illegible]

As Stanley and I were walking back on the path after some fishing, we stumbled upon her in all her serpentine glory. A scaled Sacramento-colored body with a long tail, sharp fangs, frilled gills, and webbed flippers. Her eyes shimmered like gold, with vertical pupils that eyed us with an air of curiosity, of **WARNING**. She was a sight to behold, the moonlight glistening off her scales. Upon realizing that this was no hallucination, Stanley and I stood frozen in place, unsure of what our next move was. It was bad timing; we had been caught with all our tools packed away in our bags, and any sharp movements were likely to yield lethal consequences. However, without a moment's hesitation, Stanley tossed the box of all our fishing lures—a mixture of larvae and worms—into the water before her. She didn't flinch, studying us before she disappeared into the dark waters.

According to locals, she naturally goes after drunks and sailors, which leads me to assume that she was merely deciphering whether we were drunk. For once, Stanley was sober, thank the stars for that.



THE JERSEY DEVIL



I can't believe we found it again! Sixer wanted to dock in Jersey, and of course he was feeling like a sap, so we went exploring by the beach, around where we found the original Stan O' War. And wouldn't you know it, that great big ugly Jersey Devil is still up and kicking!

We found it in that old cave we used to explore and boy, was it *REAL* mad, and real ugly. Looked different than I remember, like one of my old taxidermy exhibits; some sort of goat mixed with demon, horse and bat. I should have Soos make one of those...

Anyways! Almost knocked Sixer and me right off our feet with how much it was screeching and flailing around before we up and scrammed. And no wonder, the thing had little twin devils! The Irony! Sixer totally cried about it, I didn't of course, I just got dust in my eyes!

Ugh, all that running cannot be good for my back. Is it karma?

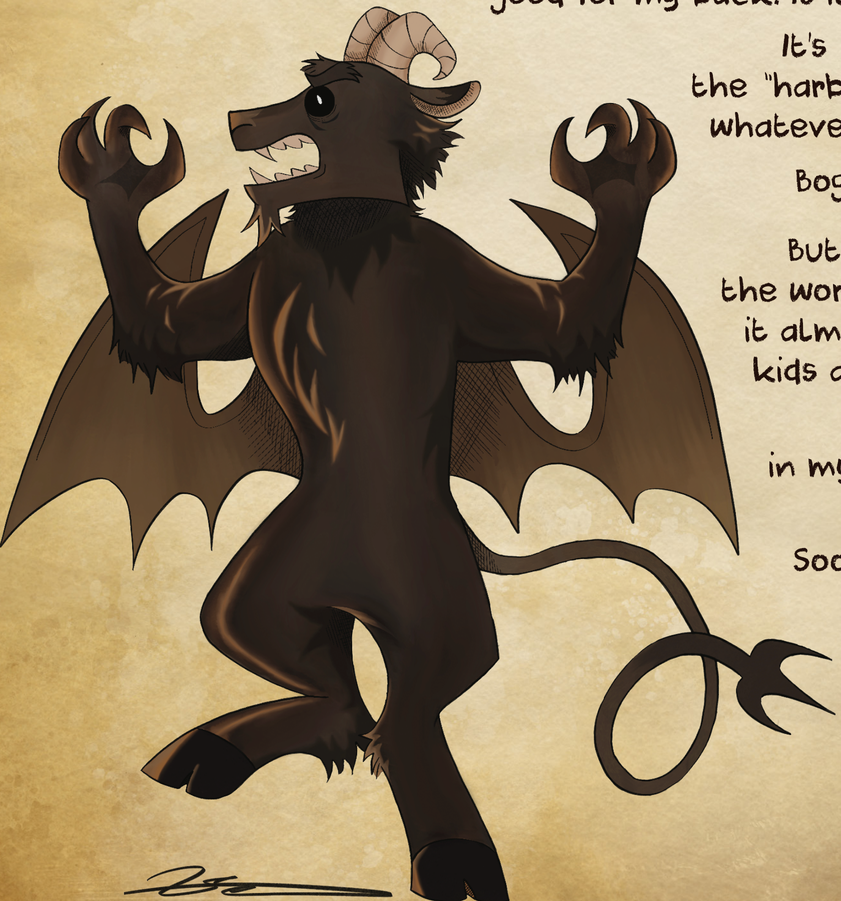
It's supposed to be the "harbinger of doom" or whatever that means.

Bogus, if you ask me.

But... docking here wasn't the worst thing in the world, it almost felt like we were kids again.

Ugh, I'm getting soft in my old age.

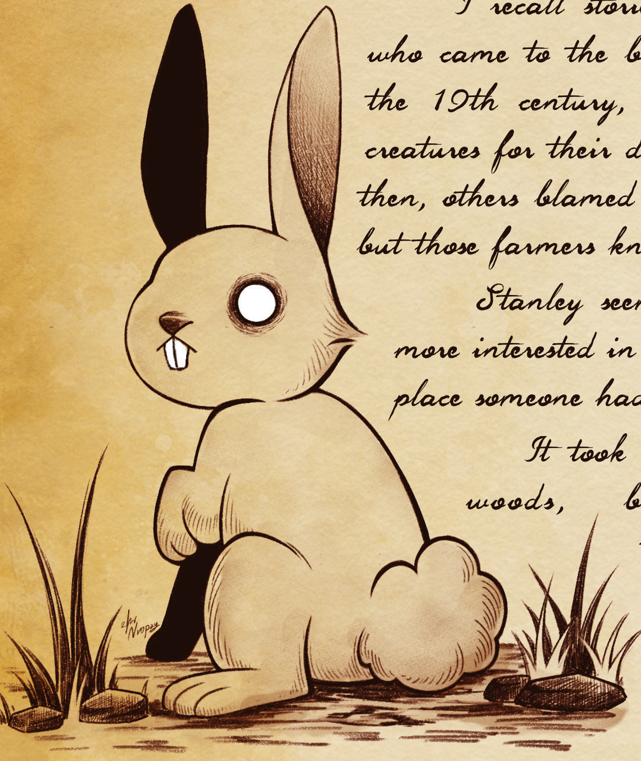
Now, time to call Soos about that exhibit...



Remind me to remind Stanley to never go up into North Jersey ever again. I have never felt more my age than when I am required to run for more than 30 minutes—truly a test of endurance!

Upon hearing from an old colleague about the re-emergence of an old cryptid, Stan and I drove up into the small township of Harmony to investigate...

The Spook Rabbit



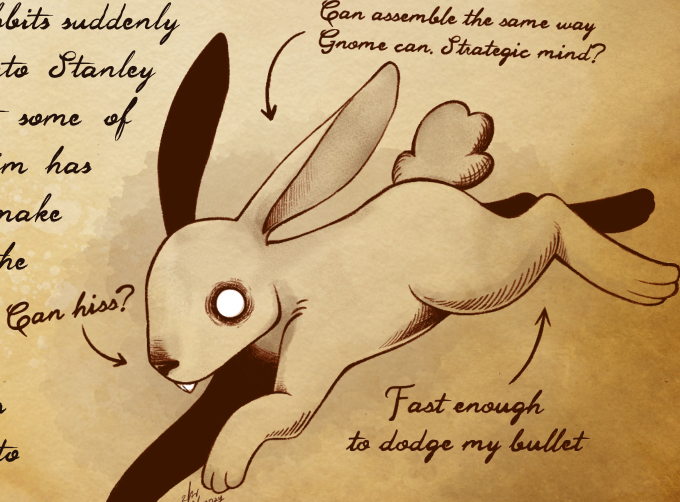
I recall stories about these in my youth from those who came to the beach in the summer. Stories go back to the 19th century, when farmers would blame the elusive creatures for their dogs getting hurt and disappearing. Back then, others blamed it on brambles and thorns from bushes, but those farmers knew better.

Stanley seemed skeptical—as always—and was far more interested in the woman showing us to the last known place someone had seen the spook bunny.

It took more than a little hiking through the woods, but we found their lair—only for Stan to tease the lead rabbit by throwing his sandwich at them!

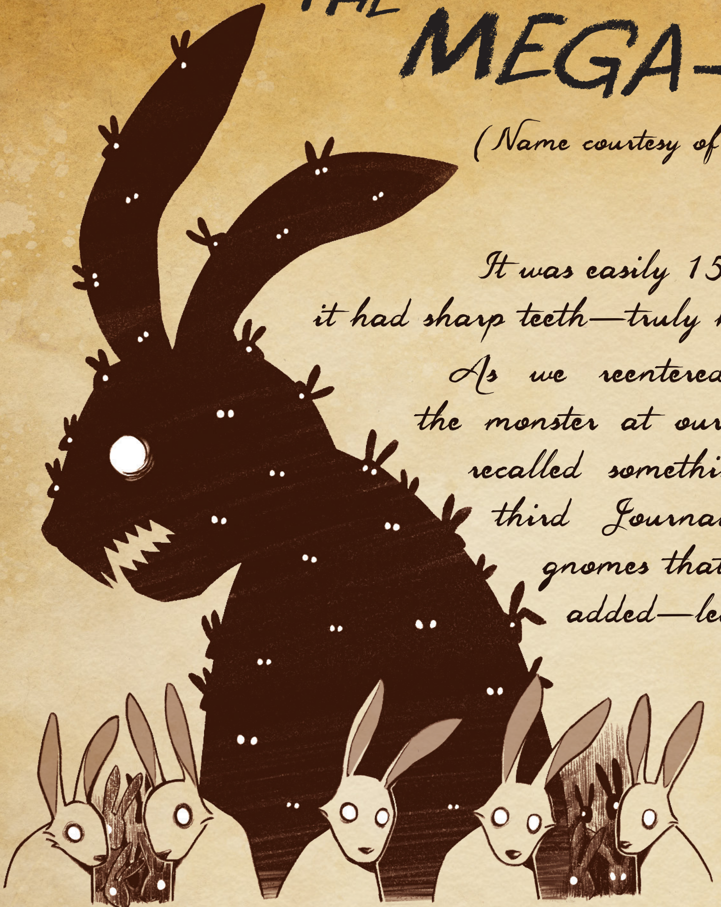
He said he thought maybe they were hungry, but now they were simply mad.

With little preamble, the rabbits suddenly flashed their teeth and jumped onto Stanley with fervor! I tried to shoot at some of them, but the dodging bullets claim has been proven true; thus, we had to make a break for it once Stanley shook the bunnies off. As we ran, hoping we could outrun them, they proceeded to do something I'd never heard of before: they all seemed to combine into a horrifying entity—


Can assemble the same way Gnome can. Strategic mind?
Can hiss?
Fast enough to dodge my bullet

THE MEGA-SPOOK BUNNY

(Name courtesy of Stan)



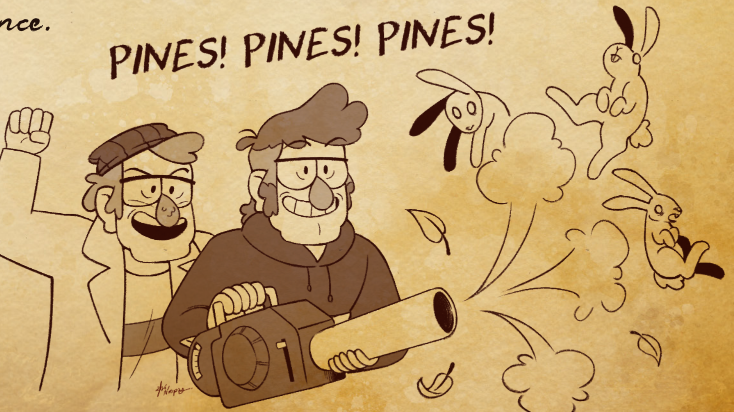
It was easily 15 feet tall and looked as if it had sharp teeth—truly horrifying!

As we reentered the small town with the monster at our heels, Stanley suddenly recalled something he had seen in my third Journal—the weakness of the gnomes that Dipper and Mabel had added—leaf blowers.

It was better than nothing.

Stan and I found a leafblower laying about behind one of the homes in a suburban development at the edge of the forest, and I promptly grabbed it, turning it on the beast with as quick a draw as I dare—and it worked! The Mega-Spook-Bunny dispersed into dozens of the smaller rabbits, and the vast majority of them scurried back into the forest. Stan swears he heard them hissing.

As for me? I was just happy to return back to our ship by the shore and happily forget that whole altercation. Though, not too fast. We need to contact Dipper and Mabel and thank them sincerely for their inadvertent assistance.


PINES! PINES! PINES!

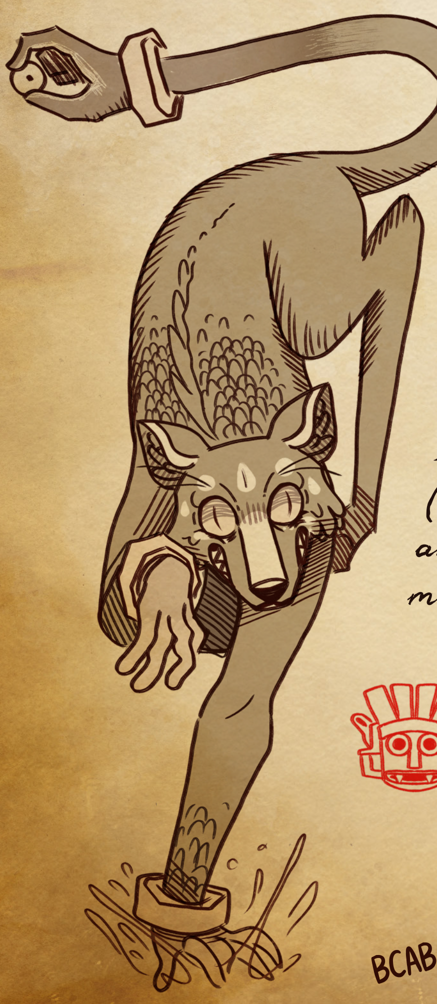
You should be thanking me too, ⚓☠🥕✋⚓*$💣$×★!

Ahuizotl

Stanley and I were sharing a cigar in Xochimilco, Mexico, when we heard an infant's shrill cry late in the night. Against my adamant warnings, Stanley ran off and pushed a fisherman's boat into the lake before I could stop him, pointing out a hand flailing in the water.

I noticed the hand itself was much too large to be an infant's, but Stanley reached out anyway, whereupon it grabbed him by the mouth and pulled his head under the surface. Under the surface!

I barely managed to pull him out, roughly throwing us both back against the boat's far side. Stanley's jaw looked slimmer, and I panicked, thinking it had harmed him. Thankfully, it had only taken his dentures. (I forgot about those!)



A pair of humanoid, monkey-like hands grabbed the ledge of the boat and pulled itself out of the water. We watched in horror—and mild fascination—as this dog-monkey-fish-creature clambered onto the boat, waving Stanley's dentures at him with its tail, which had a dextrous hand at its end.

It said something in what I now know is Náhuatl. Regrettably, I never learned Spanish (I curse my past self for taking Latin in college), and Stanley only knows Colombian Spanish. It must've realized our confusion, because it switched to Spanish after an annoyed eye roll.

It said my name, but Stanley answered before I could. I asked him to translate when it gestured towards me with a paw (hand?), and I believe Stanley

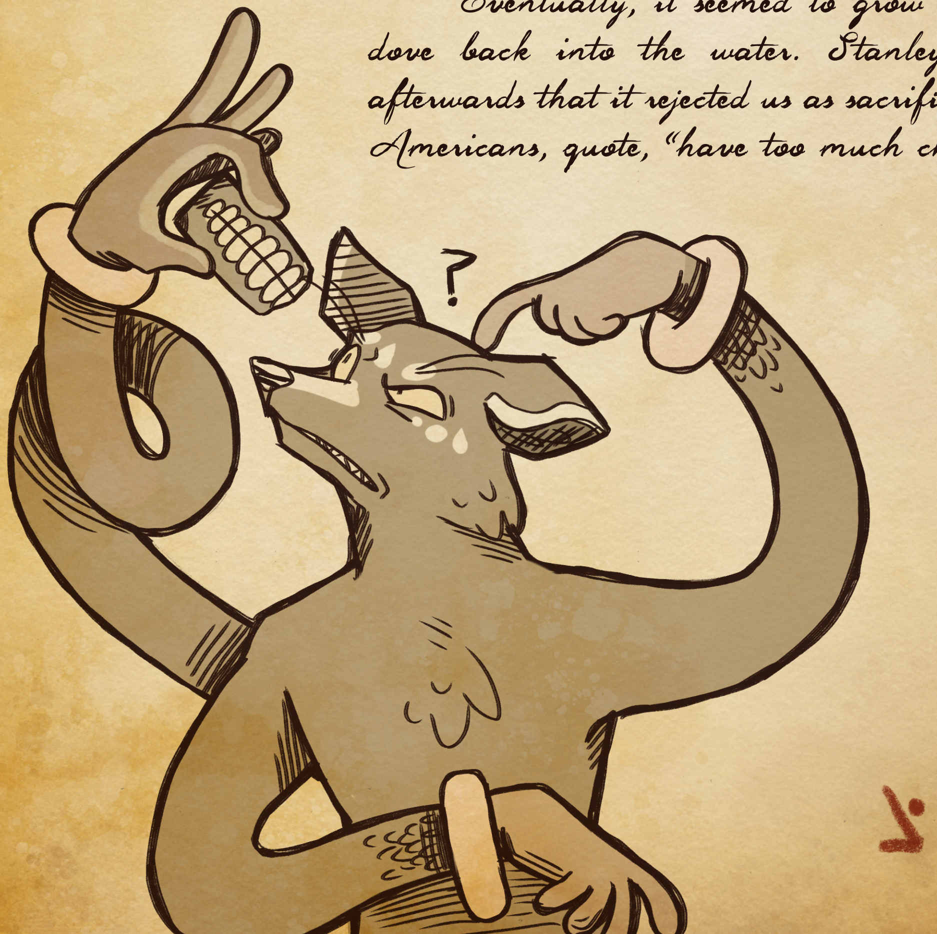
BCAB ZCPY!!

explained we're American.

This seemed to shock it, because the scales on its back rose like hackles as it switched back to Náhuatl. At our silence, it grew more exasperated, and it returned to Spanish again. I told Stan to clarify we were just passing through; however, this seemed to enrage it, as it threw the dentures back and began shrieking in Náhuatl.

Stanley attempted to explain we're simply researching anomalies, but whatever he said in the best Spanish he knew seemed to confuse it further. At this point, it climbed onto the boat, giving me the chance to catalog it! Stanley must have explained successfully, because it stood patiently for a few minutes and even readily answered questions I had Stan ask, preening under the attention.

Eventually, it seemed to grow bored and dove back into the water. Stanley told me afterwards that it rejected us as sacrifices because Americans, quote, "have too much cholesterol."



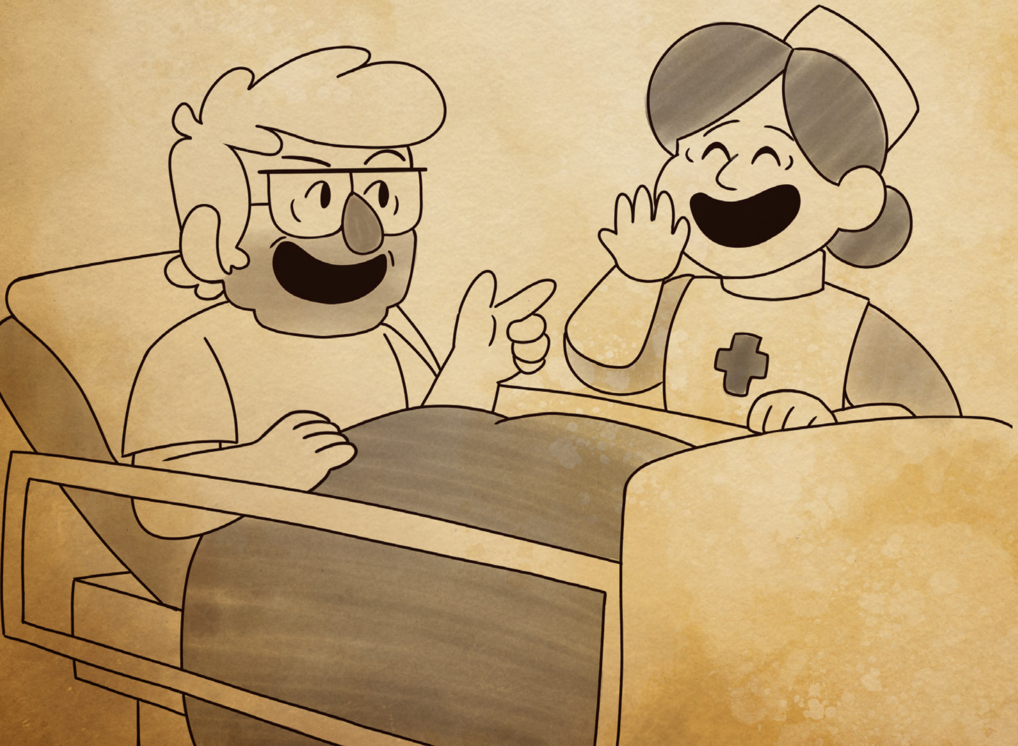
La Planchada

Sixer BEGGED me to write an entry for the journal, said that "since you were the one interacting with the cryptid, your input is more than necessary." (What a nerd...)

Anyways, while exploring Mexico City we found a street food stall that was INSANELY CHEAP! Luck was not on my side that day, and I got a nasty case of food poisoning; the worst part was having to listen to Ford's scolding about trusting suspiciously cheap food. (No regrets!)

We arrived at the "Hospital Juárez de Mexico," and after spending what felt like an eternity in the waiting room, the doctor decided that it would be best if I stayed the night to keep an eye or whatever.

I tried to sleep it off, but the discomfort was making it hard; however, that changed when during the night I felt somebody near—and when I opened my eyes, I saw her: a nurse with a perfectly ironed white uniform. She apologized for disturbing my sleep, but I assured her that I didn't mind being greeted by such an angel!

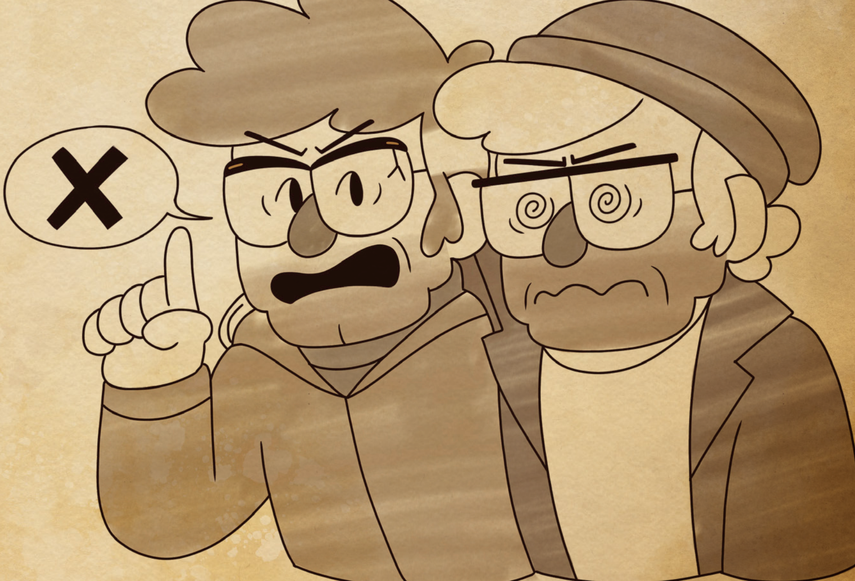


Her name was Eulalia, and we got to chat a bit while she made sure everything was in order. She started to say some weird things, like how she'd been working at this very same hospital for as long as she can remember—which was weird, 'cause she didn't look that old—and how her dedication to take care of every patient of hers came after the passing of her mom. She said she made an oath to save every single one of them, even in the afterlife.

The last thing I remember was her leaving the room, almost floating—before I passed out. Next thing I know, I was woken up way too early by Poindexter asking all kinds of questions about my health state to the nurse that let him in and, of course, I had to be the one translating the whole exchange.

I told him about Eulalia and how after her visit I was feeling better than before. The nurse making the checkup overheard the name and asked if by any chance she was wearing a long, perfectly white, ironed uniform. Oddly specific, but I said yeah.

That's how we found out that she's a ghost that worked in this hospital in 1800-something, and a lot of people call her "La Planchada" thanks to her appearance.



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Stan, please stop flirting with every female ghost we encounter; this isn't the first time

If I hear another "grammar, Stanley" I swear I'll throw you overboard, just correct the damn thing and leave me alone!!!

La mujer sonriente

Author: Nessa | *Spots:* ปุณ.Nropay_

"Oh, great, we *just* missed it."

The grumble comes out embarrassingly weak given the lack of air in his lungs and the painfully loud crack of his knees when he leans against them to catch his breath. All he can do to make up for it is give his brother the stink eye.

Ford isn't even looking at him, too busy frowning at the train starting to move away from them at increasing speeds to notice the people beyond the doors looking like they're having a laugh at their expense. Stan directs his glare at them instead.

"Well, if you had hurried up like I told you—"

"—*Or* we could have used the dang electric stairs to begin with," still hunched over, he has enough energy left to throw an arm out in the right direction to emphasize his point, "instead of driving me into an early grave."

The brief thought of making an effort to stand up straight as the last wagons disappear from view in the swirling tunnels passes through his head—the people on the other side can surely see him panting even from several feet away—but he dismisses it with a huff. They would be struggling, too, if they had been about to crack their skull open on the platform in full view of everyone who made the sensible choice of letting electricity do the work for them.

"They don't even have benches," he grumbles, eyeing the wall to try and measure what part looks comfortable enough to lean against and rest while they wait.

He finds none.

Reluctantly, he picks the closest spot and straightens himself up with a crack of his spine, letting out a deep groan of momentary satisfaction—he pointedly does not look at the heads that turn in his direction at the sound this time—before he lets his weight fall on it, uncaring of the awkward hunch of his back or the way he has to stick out his neck like a turtle. That's bound to leave him with a sore neck later, but that's not a problem *he* has to deal with right now.

"It'll be just like home, then, won't it?" Ford shrugs, but beneath the nonchalance with which he plops himself by his side, Stan can see the edge of exhaustion fighting the light mirth in the corner of his eyes.

“Well, I’m not looking forward to see how much we have to wait before we can board again.” Or how many people will end up around them by the time that happens, as the influx of people doesn’t seem to be slowing down at all.

“We could always walk,” Ford suggests slowly, pointing with his head in the direction of the traitorous stairs. Stan can’t help the grimace on his face. “But this should be faster.”

“If we manage to get on a train before midnight, you mean.”

“Do *you* want to walk then?” The other looks way too comfortable in place to truly mean his offer, and yet, it pulls a scoff from him.

“No.” If he were to be completely honest, he isn’t even particularly disgruntled about their predicament—he has waited far more for far less—but the heat accumulating in the boxy tunnel as more and more people arrive to wait for the train aren’t doing wonders for his mood. “I’m just saying that—”

The distant clatter he couldn’t hear through the chatter of the people around finally grows loud enough to interrupt him as the train shoots up in place, a blur of white and orange—and really, who picked those colors? It makes the whole thing look like an overgrown traffic cone—muting any sounds around as the wagons settle in place, the people in the platform hurrying to step in place to be the first ones to board.

He shuts his mouth with enough force to cause him to make a mental note to check his dentures later in case he cracked any parts, and pointedly refuses to look at Ford. The last thing he needs right now is the smug smirk of someone who *clearly* didn’t know the waiting times of the Mexican metro and yet is gonna take this as a win for an argument he didn’t have yet.

“You were saying?” The smugness of the declaration is a little ruined by the muted quality of it, the words drowned by the crowd huddling closer and closer around them, but it doesn’t make Stan want to roll his eyes any less.

“Oh, just shut up.” He doesn’t even bother to raise his voice; he gathers that his brother will be perfectly able to figure out the sentiment by his expression alone anyway.

Even so, he has to admit that there’s something pleasant about this positive surprise. He *really* wasn’t looking forward to sweating through all the layers of his clothes before they’ve even reached their destination.

Especially not when he can feel the annoying pressure of a building headache between his sinuses ever since they arrived in the city. Purely stress, he’s sure. Nothing to do with… well. Better to focus on the matters at hand.

“If only the old trains back home were this fast, huh?” he calls out over the head of a lady that wiggled her way between him and Ford with a—quite good, if he were to give his opinion on it—swing of her handbag, and ignoring the way she looks over her shoulder with clear distaste in her face.

Ford looks at him with a fond sparkle in his eye. “Maybe then we wouldn’t have to—”

For the second time today, the local public transport conspires against any attempts to have a coherent conversation by opening its doors at that precise moment and interrupting Ford's sentence.

There's a moment of anticipation in which he thinks absently that they can simply continue this conversation once they're on board, unconcerned about how crowded the wagon looks. The only sounds in the air are the hurried footsteps of a hundred passengers taking their leave and the white noise of a news program playing through the television screens hanging from the ceiling.

And then it's like hell itself has taken residence on Earth once again—and damn if Stan wouldn't know what that's like.

He isn't aware of having moved his legs; one second he's on the platform, waiting among others for his turn to board the train, and the next he's being forcibly pushed forward, elbows and shoulders ruthlessly digging into his back and sides, heedless of his yelps, until he can only look dumbfounded at his brother, trapped where they are near the middle of the wagon with no support nearby to hold on to.

Not that they seem to need it when the place is so cramped that he's unsure if he can even raise his arms.

The doors close once with a ring. Once. And then they reopen once again, for only a fraction of a second, before closing again, almost as if mocking everyone inside before they can actually start advancing to the next station.

"You were right, Sixer," Stan huffs out, a smirk in his face that goes unappreciated by every single person in his range of sight, "this *is* just like back at home."

This city's transport has turned out to be, overall, an unpleasant experience, and while other people valiantly air out their business for everyone to hear, raising their voices over the sound of the fans working overtime to try and keep the heat at bay—and failing miserably, if someone had to give an honest review about it—Ford doesn't feel in the mood to bicker or discuss their plans when the only thing he wants is for the train to move faster so they can be on their way as soon as possible.

Luck, as it is, isn't on his side. Perhaps it's pure irony after his brief victory earlier, though he's not particularly inclined to believe this is some sort of intervention from fate.

Just as he's calculating in his head just how much longer the train can take between one station and the next, and if it was really worth it to wait around for it when they're just gonna be squished together like overcharged particles, the metro stops.

More startling than the barely visible sight of the tunnel walls outside the windows, and more disgruntling than the poor, but still present, ventilation that he has been convincing himself he can feel, is the lights turning off and causing several people to scream.

He squints, blinking rapidly to try and get his eyes used to the darkness before searching for his brother's eyes. For a second, he believes he sees a flicker of light coming from his direction. A trick of the light, certainly, playing as a reflection in his glasses from the screens of the mobile devices several passengers hold.

Whatever the case, it is far less pressing than the question of what kind of predicament they have accidentally fallen into.

His fingers take hold of the handle of the gun hidden beneath his coat. Stanley's eyes widen in recognition, and he sees him shake his head furiously, nodding in the direction of the seats.

Following his eyes as best as he can with the current illumination, he can barely make out the brightness of a toothy smile that brings shivers to his back.

Just as he's considering throwing caution to the wind and taking action before it's too late, the lights turn on again.

He closes his eyes on reflex.

When he opens them again, he sighs in relief; it's just an old lady, dressed in an old looking, but clean black dress, and smiling at them in a way that can… hardly be called kind, but he supposes there's some merit in finding mirth among what seems to be a very common turbulence.

Most likely, she's just finding joy in the little moments in her current commute.

The next station greets them with a shift of people that isn't amusing at all. At least, not enough to have that old hag laughing at them as if she was at home watching the comedy of the hour, her jaw looking a little too open and her hair and clothes in such a poor state to make him think she has no right to be making fun of anybody here, really.

"Did nobody ever teach you it's rude to laugh at others?" he grumbles out loud, looking directly at the woman, because hell, if she's going to shamelessly stare at them with that dental paste smile, they might as well call her out on it, right?

A couple of people turn to look at him, alarm and confusion clear in their faces.

Maybe he shouldn't be enabling a confrontation when he doesn't even know how people tend to act around here, but he can feel the humidity beneath his armpits making the hair stick to the skin, the breaths he's exhaling feel hot enough to belong to an angry bull, and his spine is aching from trying not to put all his weight in the people keeping him upright by mere coincidence.

Maybe he's not in the mood to try being polite. "What? She can't just look at people like that!"

That doesn't seem to reassure anybody in the slightest, and despite the lack of space around, Stan suddenly can breath easier, the people around him scuttling away from him as if he had some kind of disease until the closest person he has is Ford.

He should feel relieved, really, but as he struggles to regain a proper balance without shoulders and arms keeping him standing, he can't help but feel the impulse to rub at his neck in embarrassment.

Ford coughs, just as the next station appears in their field of view.

"I think this is our stop," he says simply.

It's not. But Stan is not going to argue with him when he can *hear* the murmurs and feel the looks at his nape, as if he was some kind of crazy person they're waiting to call security on.

Whatever. They can just wait for the next train, even if it's probably going to be just as crowded as this one, if the amount of people waiting at the platform is anything to go by.

At least there won't be a weird old lady laughing at them anymore.

"Are you fuckin' serious right now?"

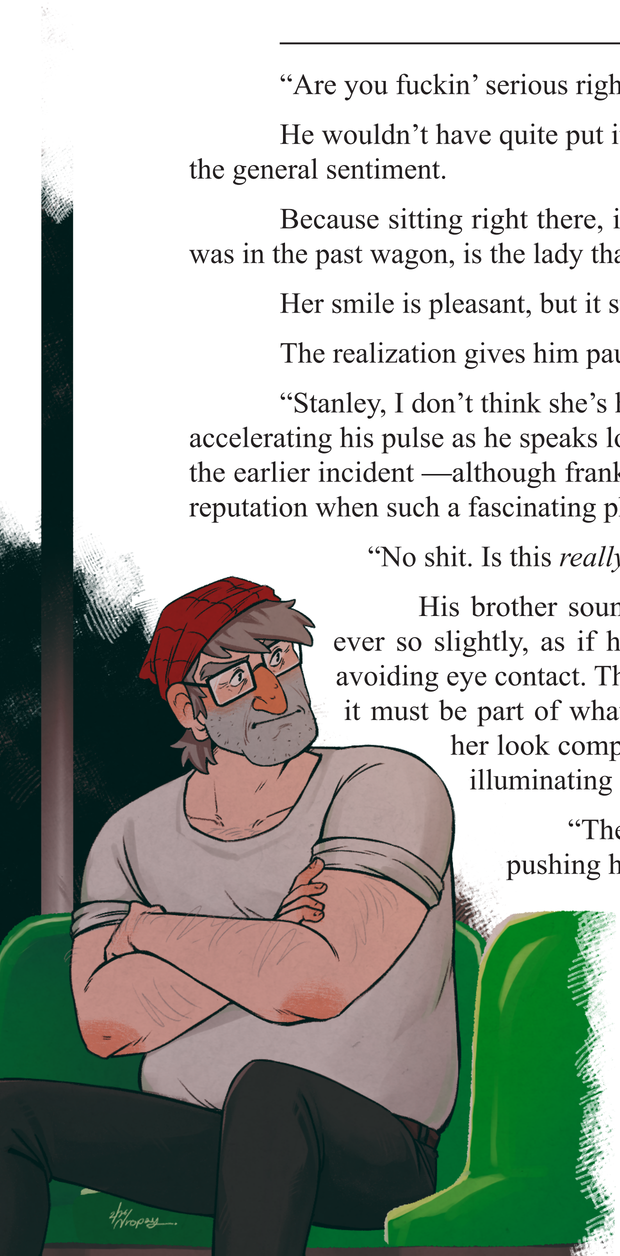
He wouldn't have quite put it that way, but Ford feels inclined to agree with the general sentiment.

Because sitting right there, in the same seat near the window in which she was in the past wagon, is the lady that laughed at Stanley's and his predicament.

Her smile is pleasant, but it still brings an involuntary tremble to his frame.

The realization gives him pause.

"Stanley, I don't think she's human," he hisses through his teeth, excitement accelerating his pulse as he speaks low enough to hopefully not have a repetition of the earlier incident —although frankly he's having a hard time caring about public reputation when such a fascinating phenomenon has fallen into their laps like this.



"No shit. Is this *really* the time?"

His brother sounds and looks mournful, arching himself back ever so slightly, as if he could fight the shivers in his body through avoiding eye contact. The woman hasn't looked away for a second, and it must be part of whatever odd enchantment she carries that makes her look completely innocent, not a hair out of place and joy illuminating her features.

"There *won't* be another time," he retorts, already pushing his way through the crowd, muttering '*permiso*' in an accent that not even his brother's surprisingly patient instructions have been able to take away.

"Seriously, Sixer, I don't think we should bother her, maybe if we just get out in the next station, she—"

Ford's hand reaches the lady's shoulder, only for it to disappear beneath his palm as if she hadn't been there at all.

He stumbles, accidentally stepping on someone's feet and earning himself a push from behind. Startled as he is by the disappearance of their target, he doesn't even think to protest the rough treatment, even if it's accompanied by harsh words that he can't make sense of.

The man whose foot he accidentally bruised looks fully ready to throttle him.

Grabbing Ford by the arm and dragging him out of the wagon as soon as the doors open is only the logical solution so he doesn't have to punch an asshole in the face—even if it was Ford the one who acted like an asshole first—and it has nothing at all to do with the apprehension that the creepy old woman will appear again as soon as they leave the station.

The other man shows no resistance, but there's a look on his face that he *really* doesn't like.

"I think we need to keep boarding the same wagon so we can make contact with her," Ford says, as soon as the train has left a gust of wind and an echo of noise in its wake.

He really, *really* doesn't like it when Ford gets like this.

"Hell no, are you crazy? She was looking at us like she wanted to dissect us and exhibit our heads over her coffee table."

"May I remind you we're here to study cryptids?"

"Yes. *Cryptids*, not crazy apparitions that want us *dead*," he deadpans.

Ford dismisses him with a wave of his hand, sticking his head out to watch for the next train.

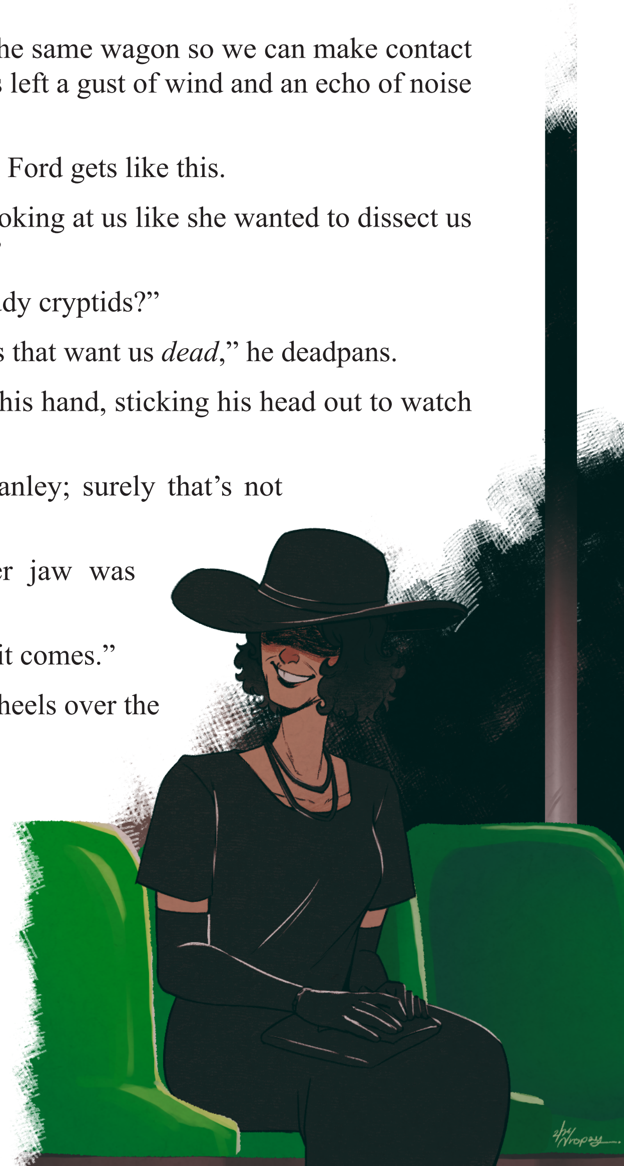
"She was just laughing a little, Stanley; surely that's not worse than everything we've faced so far."

"Laughing a little? More like her jaw was detaching from her head."

The other perks up. "Oh, look, here it comes."

And sure enough, the grind of the wheels over the rails makes Stan grimace.

"You know what? You can chase after that creep if you want. *I*," he starts walking away, slow enough to make his point before they have to board, "am going to find another wagon. Preferably without horrible spirits."



He can barely make out the *'she wasn't* that *horrible'* before he takes a bunch of confident steps into the wagon behind the one they were in, accompanied by a group of anxious people trying to reach their destinations.

Finally. He lets out a heavy sigh. Some nice—*stuffy*, and crowded—ghost-free journey for him.

When he turns around to take on the people on the wagon, he can physically feel the blood draining from his face.

For the record, Ford would like to clarify he's stepping out of the wagon because he failed to localize the old spirit in the seat she was supposed to be, not because the people in there look ready to call the cops on him for having grabbed the old woman sitting there and having tried to interrogate her.

… Although he can admit that being detained would be quite the inconvenience to his current pursuits.

It's merely that it's hard to distinguish a spectral woman from one made of flesh and bone when the only difference is the amount of glee she seems to take in his discomfort.

Perhaps it's time to try a different approach. It's quite possible that the specter has been scared away, but if the persistence of the phenomenon the second time is any indication, it's equally as likely that she will be in the next wagon, just waiting to unveil her secrets as long as he can figure out how to keep her in place without her disappearing like a puff of smoke.

Determined to see this through, he walks toward the next part of the platform, following the influx of women and children who look just as exhausted as everyone else around. If he's lucky, he could even find his cryptid right among them.

"¡Hey!" A voice calls out, stopping him from his march forward. When he turns around, he sees the unmistakable uniform of a police officer, with the man looking almost bored as he delivers instructions. "Sólo mujeres y niños."

He blinks, trying to decide if that's something that he should pay attention in his quest for knowledge or not. The officer looks at him with a furrowed brow and says something in a clearly condescending tone before grabbing him by the arm.

"You cannot cross there." The annoyed tone leaves it clear how the man feels about having to switch languages for him. "If you insist, I'll have to take you in."

As the doors of the train are about to close, a figure stumbles from the wagon just beside the one Ford himself emerged from a minute ago, managing to jump out just before the doors close.

The first thing he registers is that the person is panting as if he had ran a marathon, rather than just squeezing his way out of the train. The second is that Stanley looks *pissed*.

"*Every. single. one.* She was in every single wagon I boarded!"

It passes through his head that he should wait until they're alone to complain, but after the repeated encounters with what must be a vengeful spirit here to haunt him, he doesn't have the delicacy to even try anymore.

"Nobody else noticed either," he adds sourly, coming to a stop in front of his brother and the policeman that is still holding his arm, even while looking at Stan like he has spontaneously grown a second head in front of him.

He almost wished he had; it would be by far more enjoyable than witnessing how the woman looked more and more ready to take his soul with every passing minute. The shudder that takes hold over him is entirely a product of his memories, but it doesn't make him feel any better.

"Are you certain?" Ford asks, indifferent to his arm still being grasped, clenching his fingers around nothing as if he were wishing he had his journal in them right now.

"What does it look like?" He tries his best to keep the bite out of his voice.

Tries.

"What exactly is happening here?" the cop asks, holding tightly onto Ford. That looks like it's gonna to be a problem.

Ford immediately turns to look at him, his eyes shining with what has to be one of his worst ideas so far.

"We're looking for an old woman. She was wearing an old, neat, black dress."

The man raises an eyebrow. "You got lost?"

Before Stan can intervene, Ford shakes his head emphatically.

"No. Although we *are* having trouble finding her."

Speak for yourself, he thinks.

"She had a big smile and laughed at what seemed to be arbitrary instances. I tried to approach her but she disappeared."

He's doing a terrific job of making himself look crazy.

Though, unlikely as it would seem—not as much with the day Stan has been having so far frankly—a girl stops in her tracks, clearly having overheard their conversation.

"*La mujer sonriente.*"

Ford blinks. "What?"

"The smiling lady," she repeats insistently. "She appears in this line."

Stan can already see the gears turning in his brother's head.

"Before you say anything, I'm *not* spending the day here chasing after a crazy old woman."

The girl interjects.

"She's not crazy. She's a ghost."

Right, because that makes it *so* much better.

Ford finally frees himself from the policeman's hold, reaching inside his coat to grab paper and pen before looking earnestly at the new addition to their mismatched group.

"Tell me what you know," he says, making the girl light up as if she had been waiting her whole life for someone to ask that question. Teenagers these days.

Ford, to his disappointment, finds out that nobody has managed to ever interact directly with the specter—or, if they have, they haven't actually lived to tell the tale, which is a far more grim option that Stan doesn't want to contemplate so soon after having seen her face-to-face—and her motivations remain unknown, as she only seems to appear in a whim. The girl, for all her zeal, doesn't seem to know a lot about her origins or identity, but his brother still writes down every detail with the look of a thirsty man being handed a glass of water.

At least him dealing with the kinder side of the spirit means that Stan won't have to gaze upon the creepy visage of the woman once Ford decides that he would like to include a sketch in his new journal.

Finally, they run out of new information to talk about.

"Thanks, kiddo. I guess." He mutters the last part, earning a bright smile and a wave from the girl anyway.

The policeman, confounded and shaking his head, seems to lose interest as soon as Ford starts prattling about the 'fascinating' discovery and inquiring about the next step in their path, and it's then that Stan finally looks at the name of the platform. The stylized image of a grasshopper stares back at him, making him frown.

"Sixer."

"Yes?"

"Our stop was four stations ago."

Ford opens his mouth.

"I'm not taking the metro back."

And promptly closes it.

Despite his best efforts, once they have finally crossed over to the other side of the platform to take the train going the opposite direction and enter the first, hopefully ghost-free wagon they have available, he can't bring himself to keep in the groan that bursts from his lips at the sight of a tousled old lady smiling at them.

"You have to be freakin' kidding me."

Maybe walking isn't so bad after all.

I never took the train back home much, especially not after being kicked out and only having the car to my name.

But all that running back and forth between wagons and weird looks from the locals somehow reminded me of watchin' tourists file off the bus to the beach and Shermie, Ford, and I would follow after the most gullible lookin' to tell 'em the shops all used sand dollars instead of real dollars. Those chumps gladly traded with us, and we quickly ran off to the candy shop before any of them wised up.

When Ma found out and saw how much candy we got from our little scam, she laughed so hard tears gathered in her eyes. Then she made us promise to get her salt water taffy next time.

Ford and I probably looked similarly gullible to anyone from here, huh?

I wonder if any shops nearby sell salt water taffy.

I forgot all about this... now that I recall, Shermie always made us collect the sand dollars while he flirted with the weekend lifeguard, but he let us have most of the candy.

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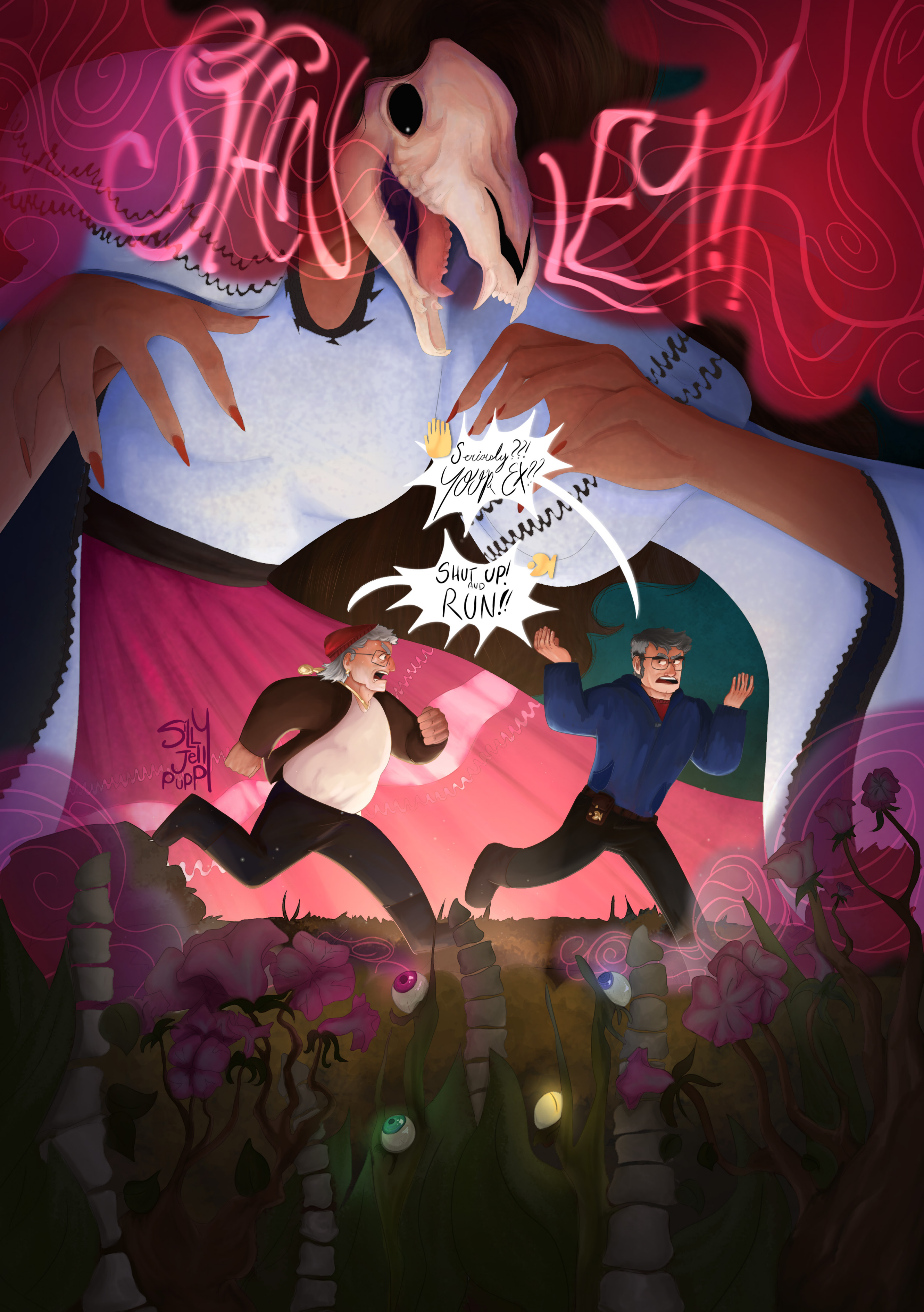
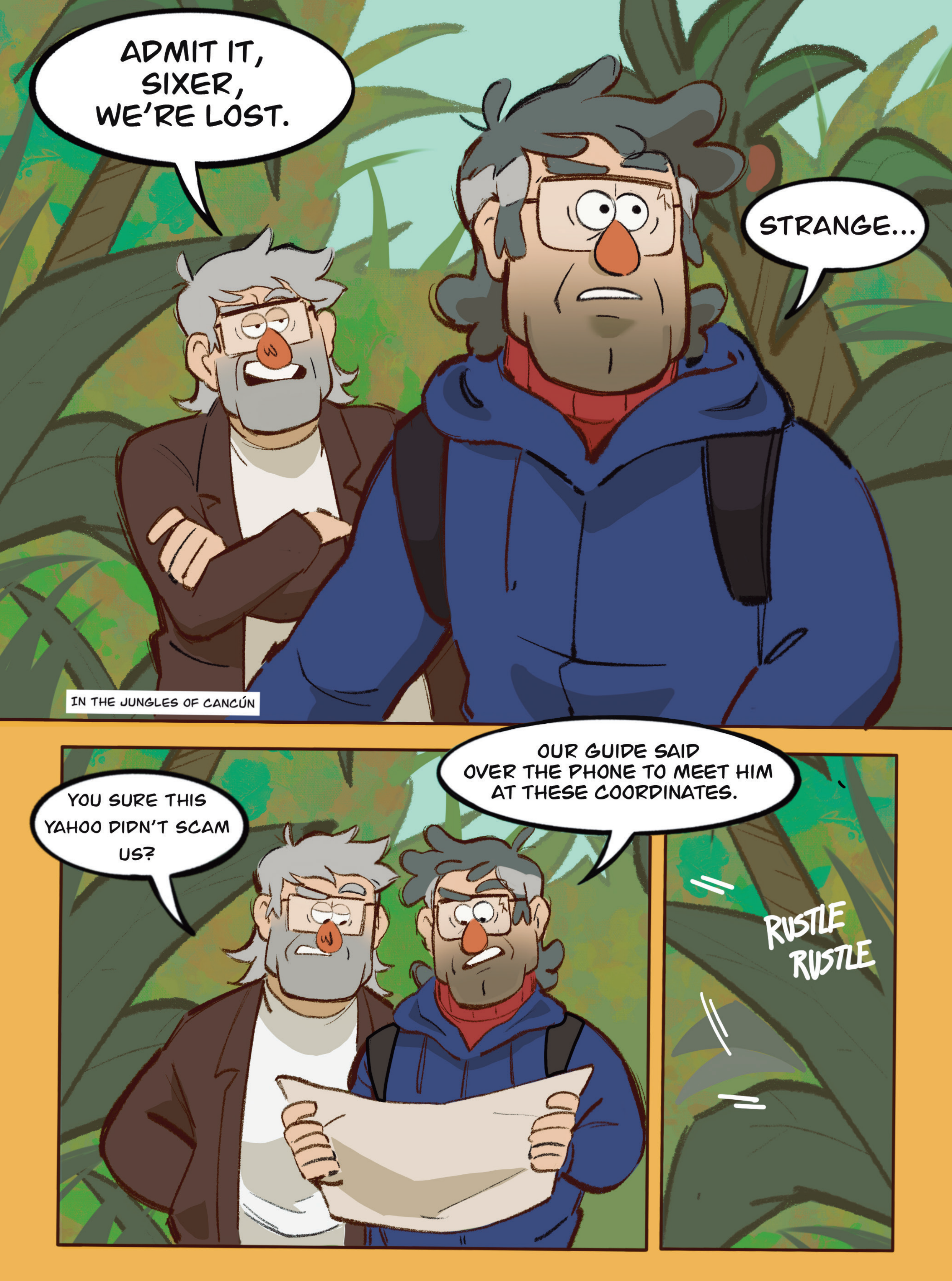
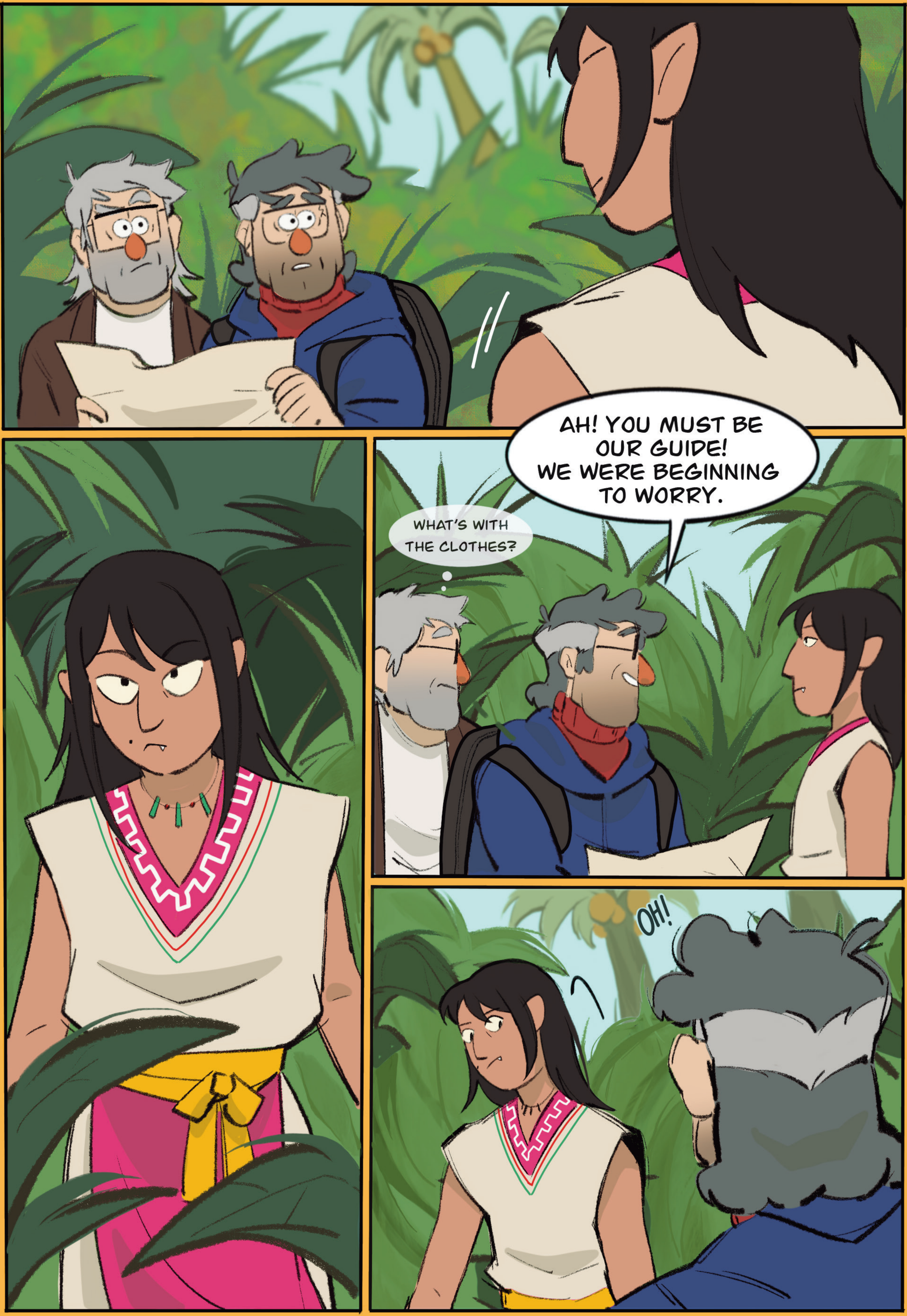
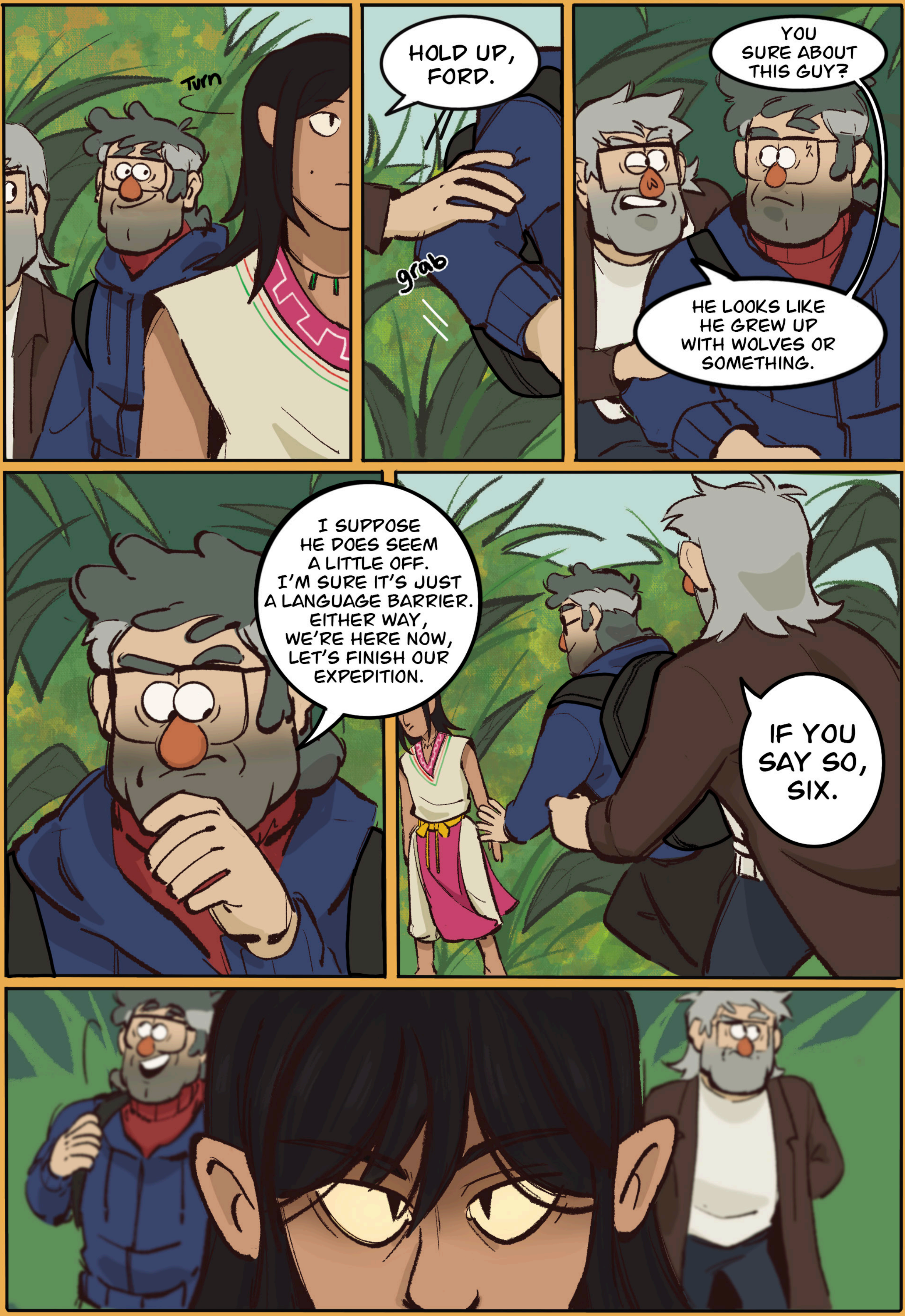

STANLEY!!
Seriously??! YOUR EX??
SHUT UP! AND RUN!!
SiLLY JeLLY PuPPY

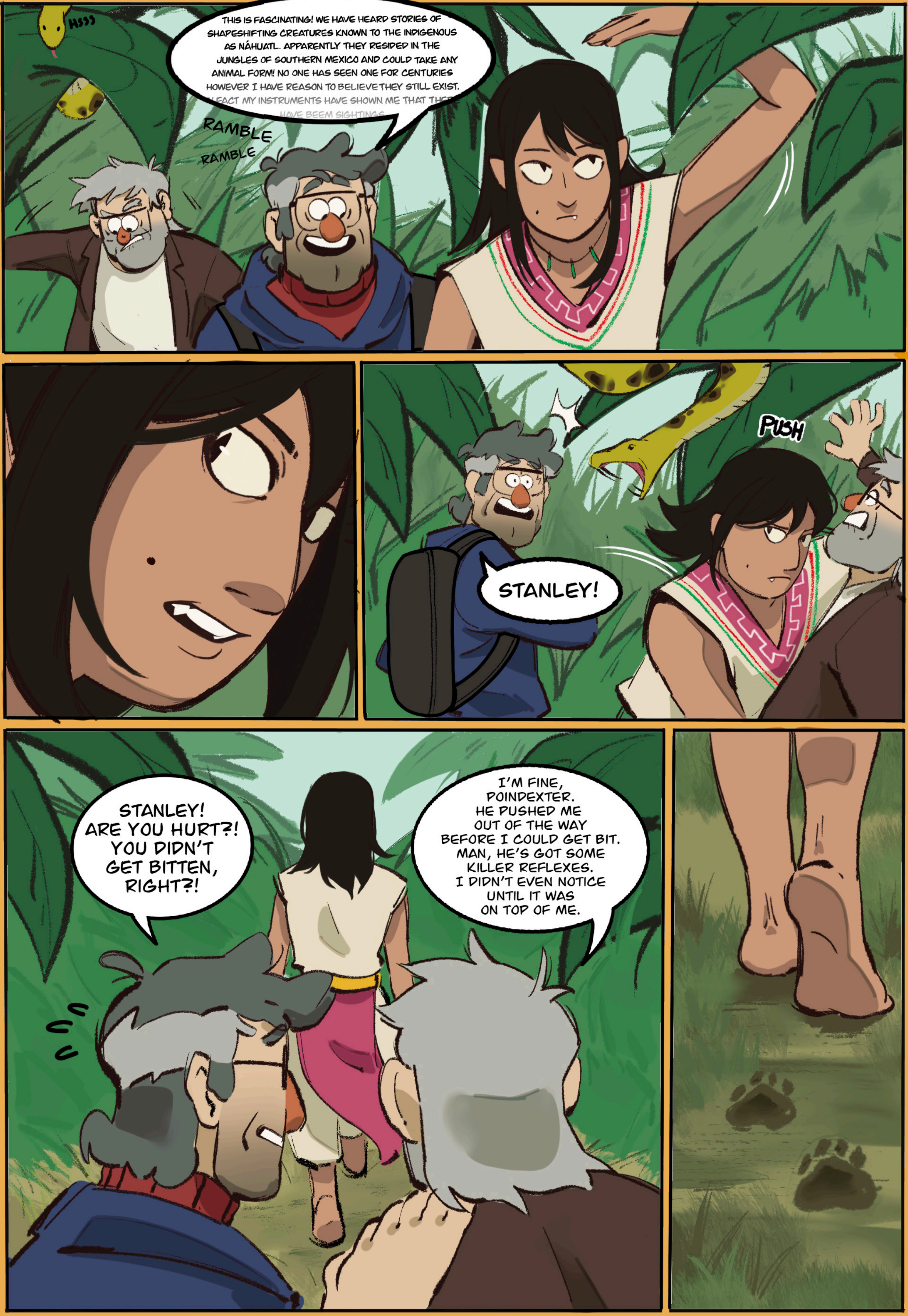
THE NAHUATL

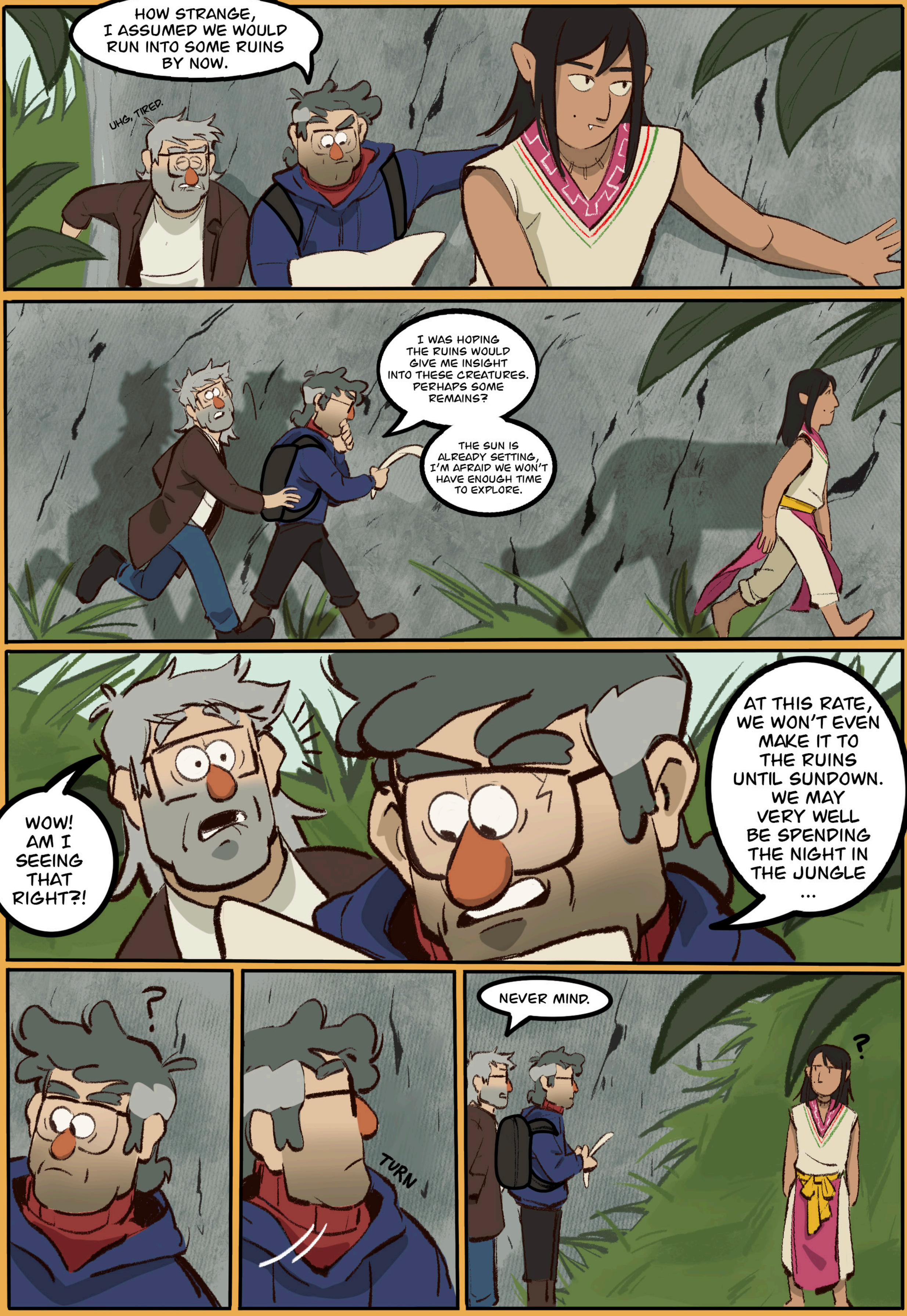
Comic by Casarole

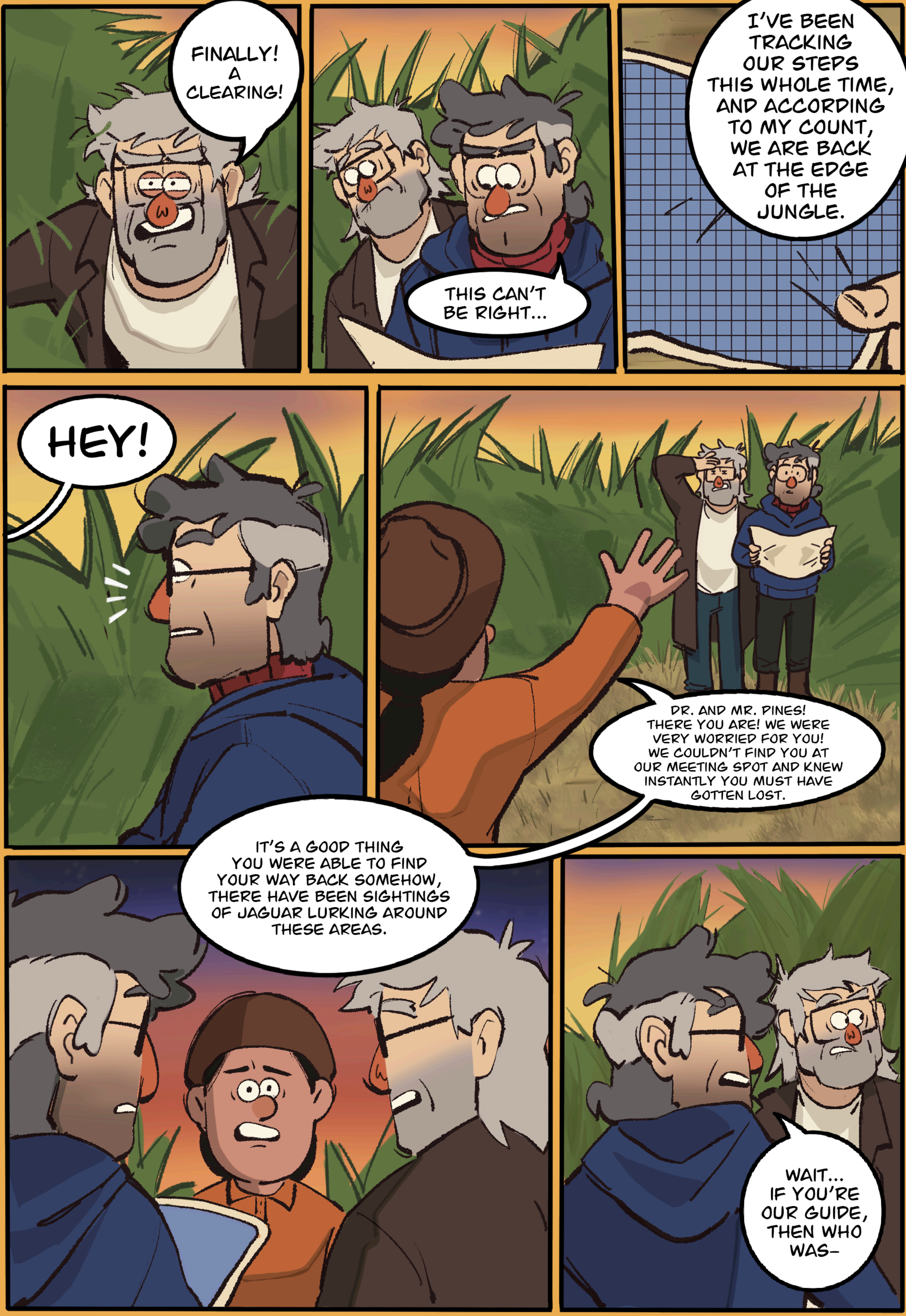

ADMIT IT, SIXER, WE'RE LOST.
STRANGE...
IN THE JUNGLES OF CANCÚN
YOU SURE THIS YAHOO DIDN'T SCAM US?
OUR GUIDE SAID OVER THE PHONE TO MEET HIM AT THESE COORDINATES.
RUSTLE
RUSTLE

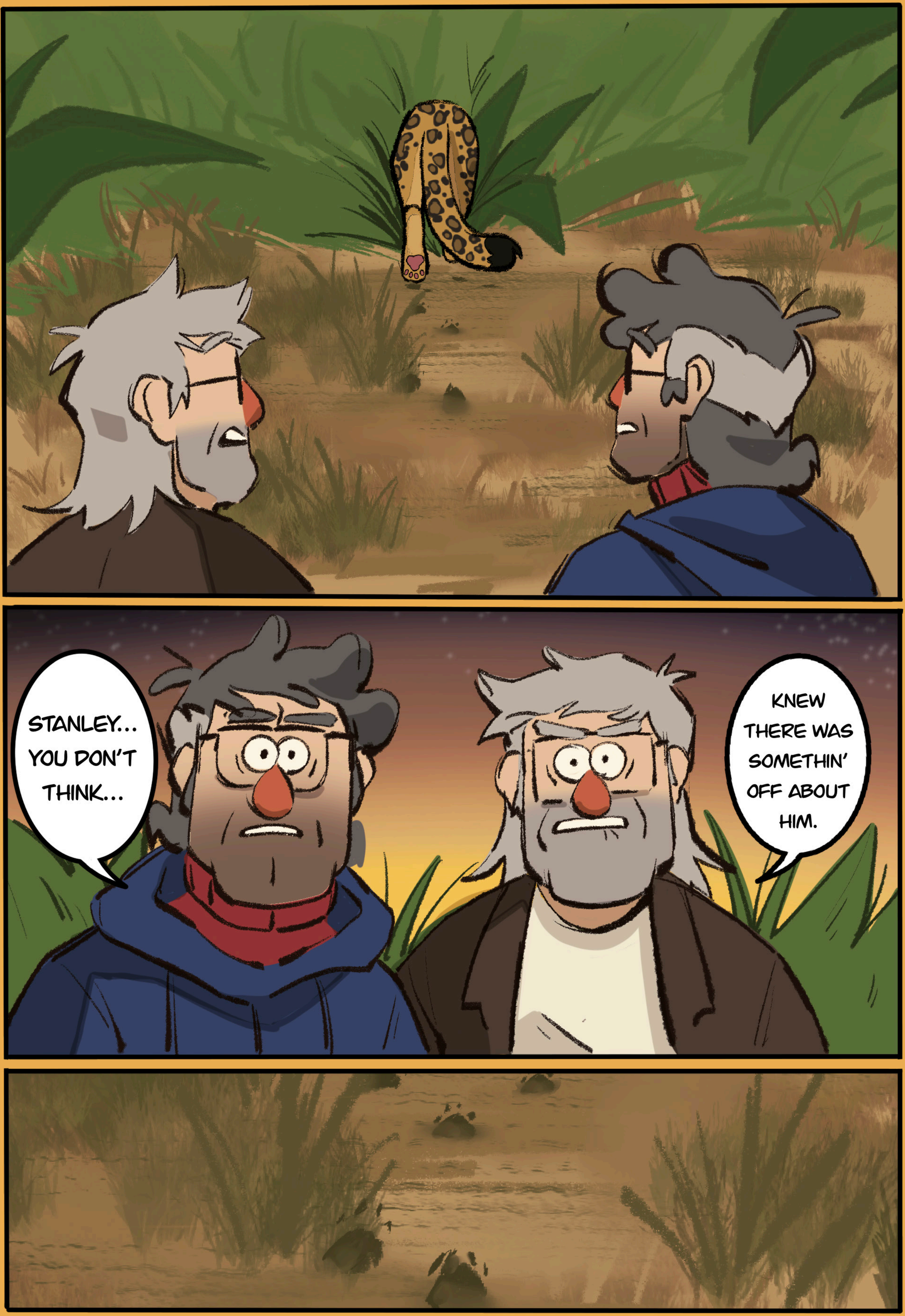

AH! YOU MUST BE OUR GUIDE! WE WERE BEGINNING TO WORRY.
WHAT'S WITH THE CLOTHES?
OH!


Turn
HOLD UP, FORD.
grab
YOU SURE ABOUT THIS GUY?
HE LOOKS LIKE HE GREW UP WITH WOLVES OR SOMETHING.
I SUPPOSE HE DOES SEEM A LITTLE OFF. I'M SURE IT'S JUST A LANGUAGE BARRIER. EITHER WAY, WE'RE HERE NOW, LET'S FINISH OUR EXPEDITION.
IF YOU SAY SO, SIX.


HSSS
THIS IS FASCINATING! WE HAVE HEARD STORIES OF SHAPESHIFTING CREATURES KNOWN TO THE INDIGENOUS AS NÁHUATL. APPARENTLY THEY RESIDED IN THE JUNGLES OF SOUTHERN MEXICO AND COULD TAKE ANY ANIMAL FORM! NO ONE HAS SEEN ONE FOR CENTURIES HOWEVER I HAVE REASON TO BELIEVE THEY STILL EXIST. N FACT MY INSTRUMENTS HAVE SHOWN ME THAT THE HAVE BEEM SIGHTINGS
RAMBLE
RAMBLE
PUSH
STANLEY!
STANLEY! ARE YOU HURT?! YOU DIDN'T GET BITTEN, RIGHT?!
I'M FINE, POINDEXTER. HE PUSHED ME OUT OF THE WAY BEFORE I COULD GET BIT. MAN, HE'S GOT SOME KILLER REFLEXES. I DIDN'T EVEN NOTICE UNTIL IT WAS ON TOP OF ME.

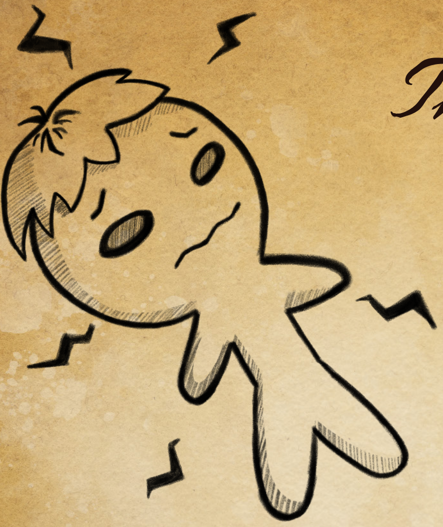

HOW STRANGE, I ASSUMED WE WOULD RUN INTO SOME RUINS BY NOW.
UHG, TIRED.
I WAS HOPING THE RUINS WOULD GIVE ME INSIGHT INTO THESE CREATURES. PERHAPS SOME REMAINS?
THE SUN IS ALREADY SETTING, I'M AFRAID WE WON'T HAVE ENOUGH TIME TO EXPLORE.
WOW! AM I SEEING THAT RIGHT?!
AT THIS RATE, WE WON'T EVEN MAKE IT TO THE RUINS UNTIL SUNDOWN. WE MAY VERY WELL BE SPENDING THE NIGHT IN THE JUNGLE ...
?
TURN
NEVER MIND.
?


FINALLY! A CLEARING!
THIS CAN'T BE RIGHT...
I'VE BEEN TRACKING OUR STEPS THIS WHOLE TIME, AND ACCORDING TO MY COUNT, WE ARE BACK AT THE EDGE OF THE JUNGLE.
HEY!
DR. AND MR. PINES! THERE YOU ARE! WE WERE VERY WORRIED FOR YOU! WE COULDN'T FIND YOU AT OUR MEETING SPOT AND KNEW INSTANTLY YOU MUST HAVE GOTTEN LOST.
IT'S A GOOD THING YOU WERE ABLE TO FIND YOUR WAY BACK SOMEHOW, THERE HAVE BEEN SIGHTINGS OF JAGUAR LURKING AROUND THESE AREAS.
WAIT... IF YOU'RE OUR GUIDE, THEN WHO WAS-


STANLEY... YOU DON'T THINK...
KNEW THERE WAS SOMETHIN' OFF ABOUT HIM.

END.

@HAD_BEEN_FOUND



The Chichiricú

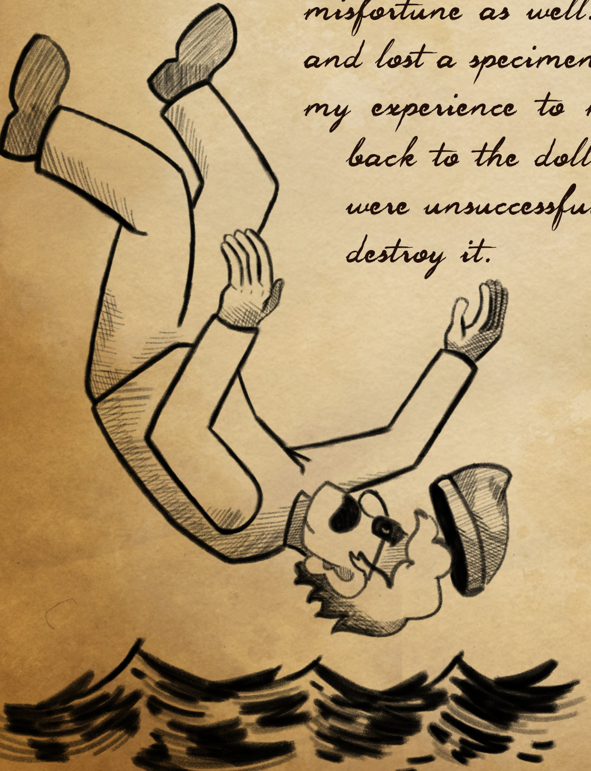
The Stan O'War II found itself in desperate need of repairs, leading to my brother and I stopping in the small Caribbean island of Cuba in search of new parts.

After haggling with vendors we were given a small clay doll. Seemingly a normal (if a little creepy) toy, we set it aside and continued on our way. Stan remarked about an annoying buzzing noise, but I assumed his hearing aid was acting up again.

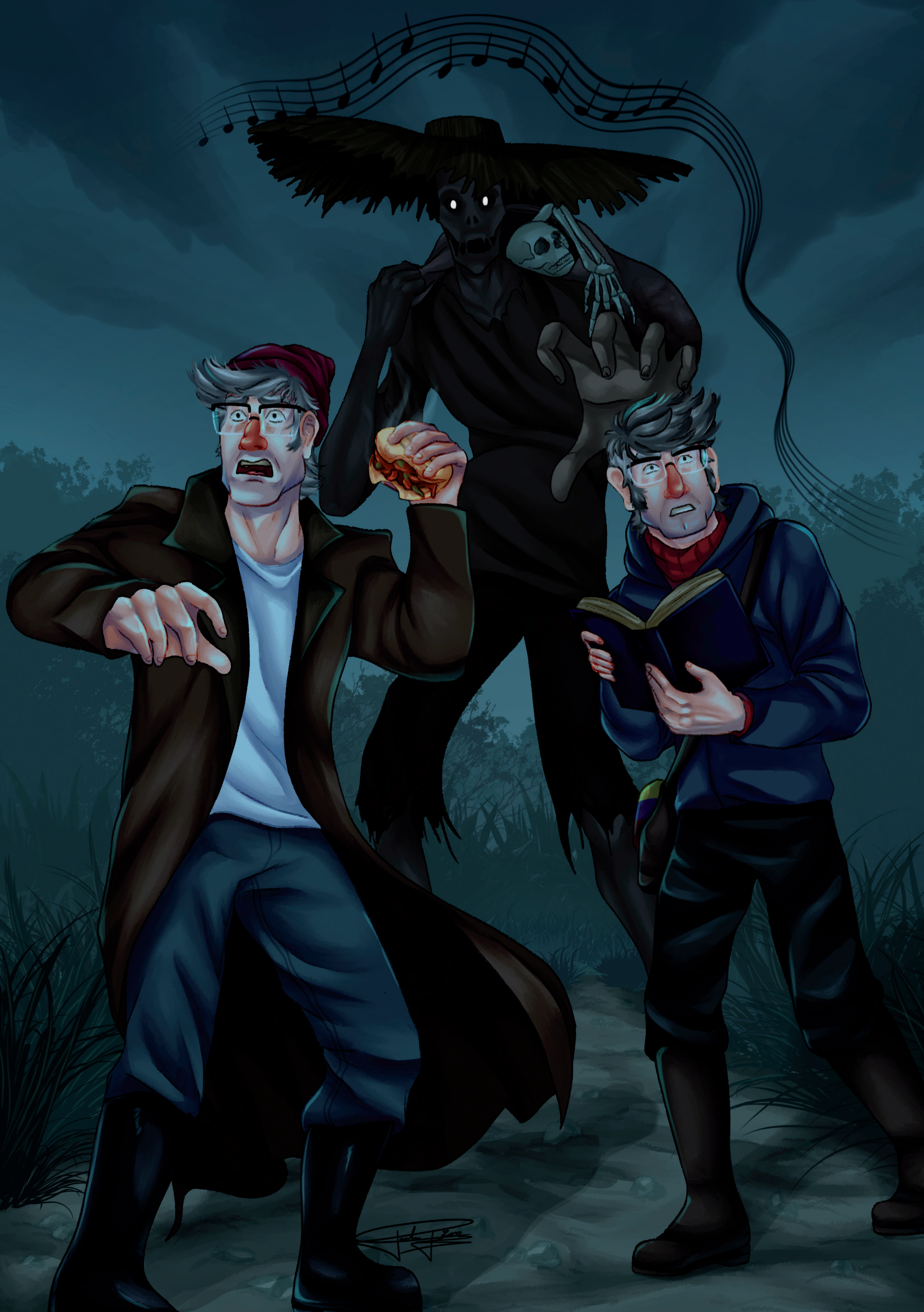
I knew right away that there was something messed up about that doll, but as usual Poindexter ignored my very insightful observations. I decided to be proactive and threw out the little thing, only to find it on my bedside table the next morning. I figured Sixer was playing some dumb joke, so I decided to throw the thing overboard—only for the wind to pick up out of nowhere and fling me overboard! After Poindexter fished me out of the ocean I could see the stupid doll sitting against the wall behind him.

NDSZM NODGG KGVTN RDOC YJGGN

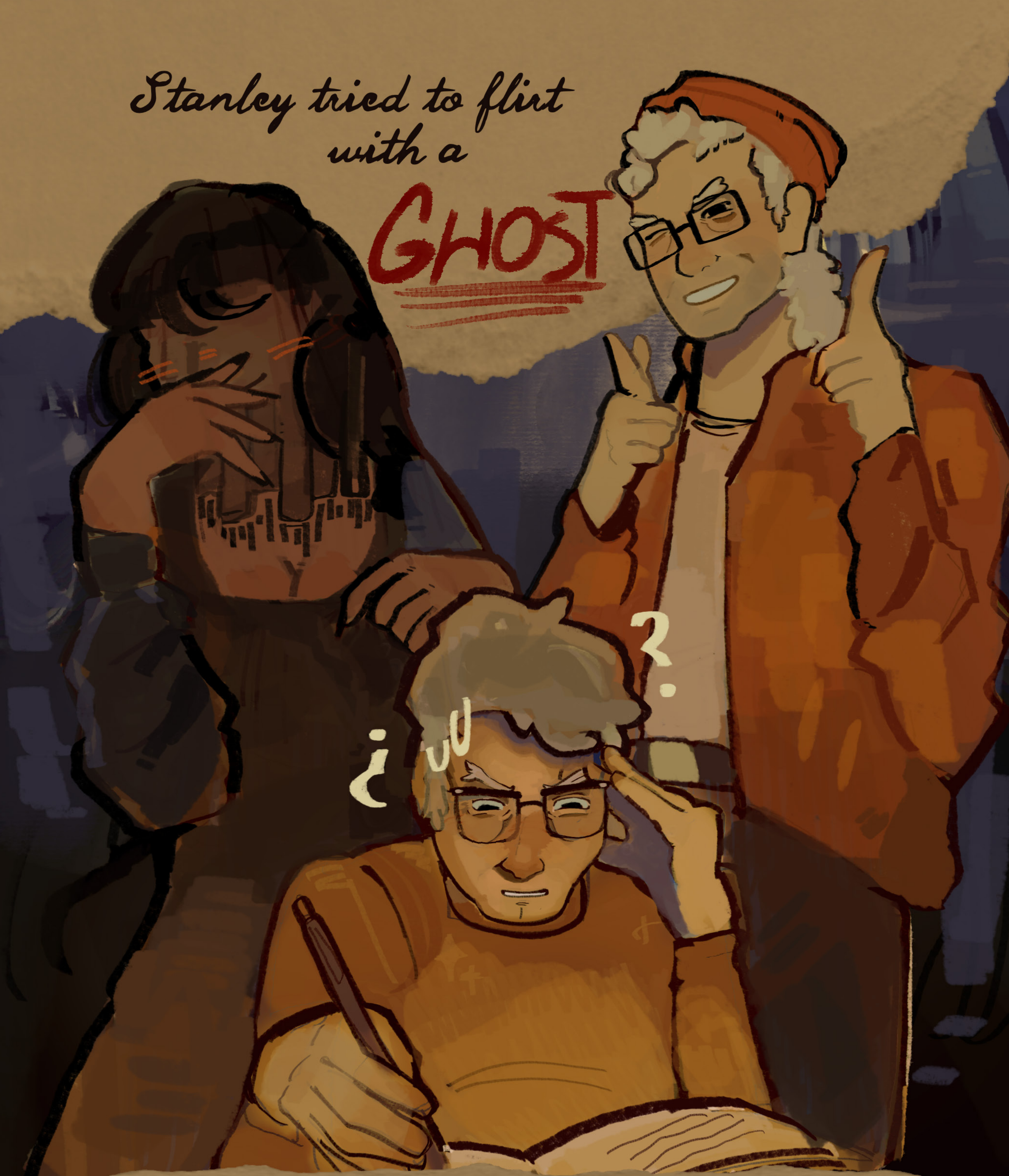
Throughout the day I found myself the victim to misfortune as well. I continually spilled ink on my notes and lost a specimen I had been studying. After comparing my experience to my brother's, we traced our misfortune back to the doll. Any further attempts to dispose of it were unsuccessful; even burning the doll did nothing to destroy it.



We were forced to turn around and find the seller who gave us the doll—he helpfully explained that he was offended by our harsh negotiation and had us give a sincere apology before taking back the doll. We have since set sail and had no issues with it returning.



Stanley tried to flirt with a GHOST

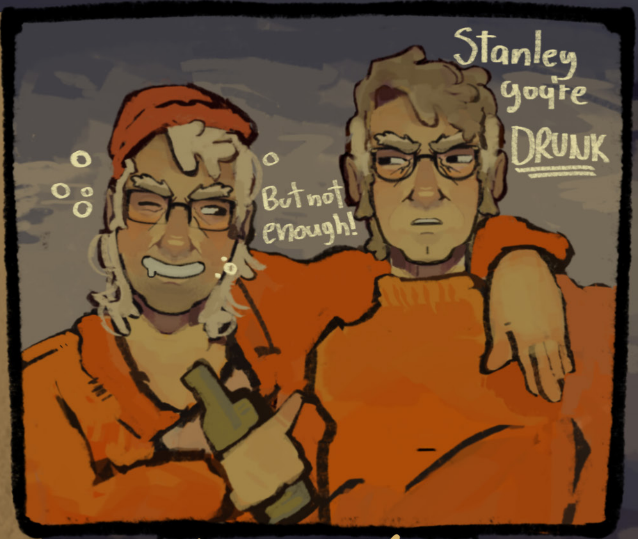


Journal Entry #????

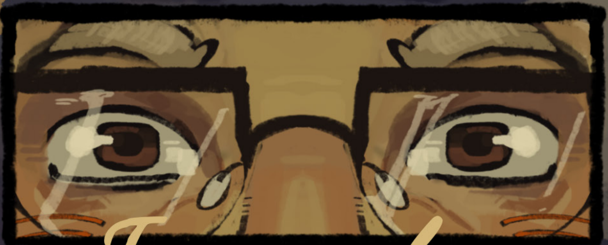
La Dama Tapada, Guayaquil Ecuador

I'm not even sure how to begin writing this entry. (Actually, I know, I just wrote the title on top.)

Stanley and I went out for some drinks last night—HIS idea, naturally. He insisted it would be a "great way to socialize with the locals." (I maintain there are far better methods, preferably ones that do not involve suspicious looking cocktails.) His attitude was beginning to annoy me.

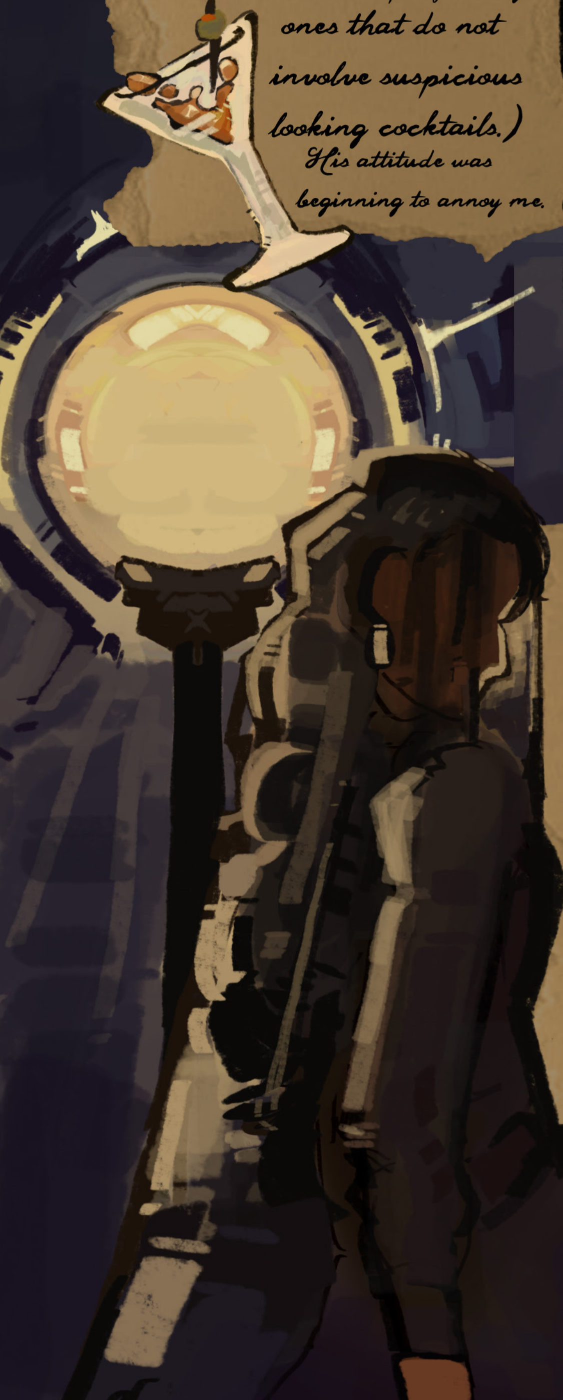


and just then...

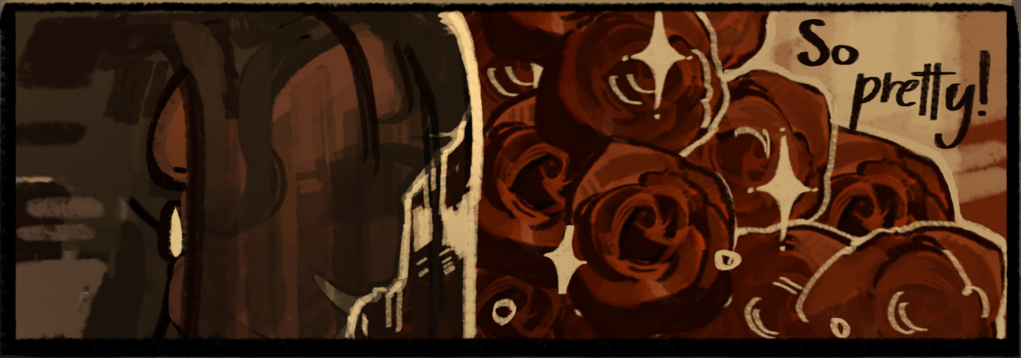


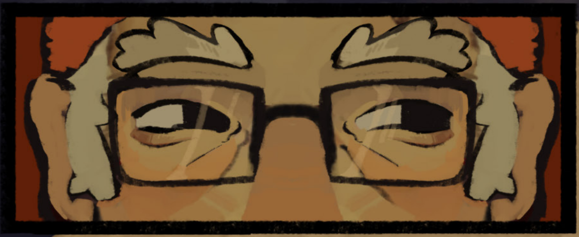
I saw her.

At approximately 3:58 A.M., while staggering back to our lodgings, we observed a woman dressed in elegant, antiquated black attire, complete with a long, face-covering veil. Despite the hour, she appeared immaculate and strangely luminous under the streetlights.



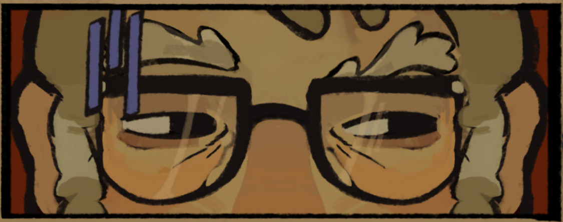
Stanley immediately declared she was «a beauty» and «way out of his league», a fact I did not bother disputing





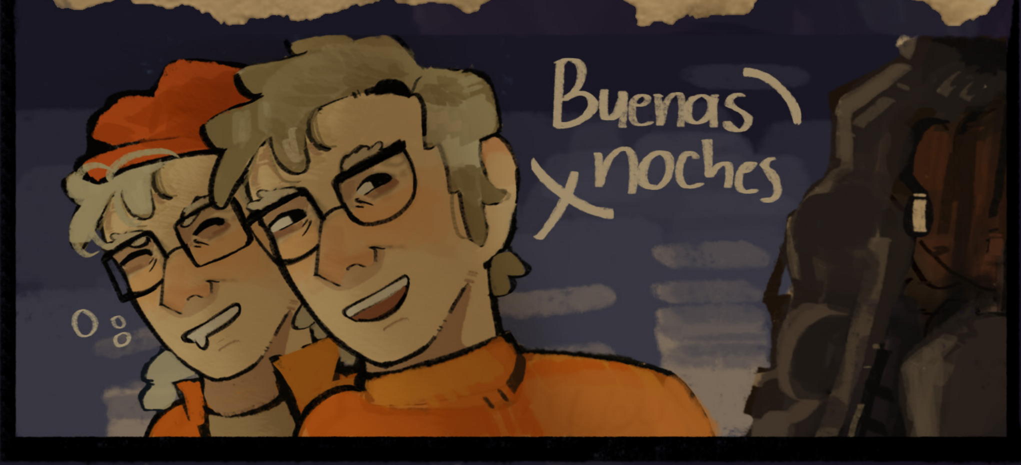
I followed his gaze, noticing the strange clothing the woman wore.

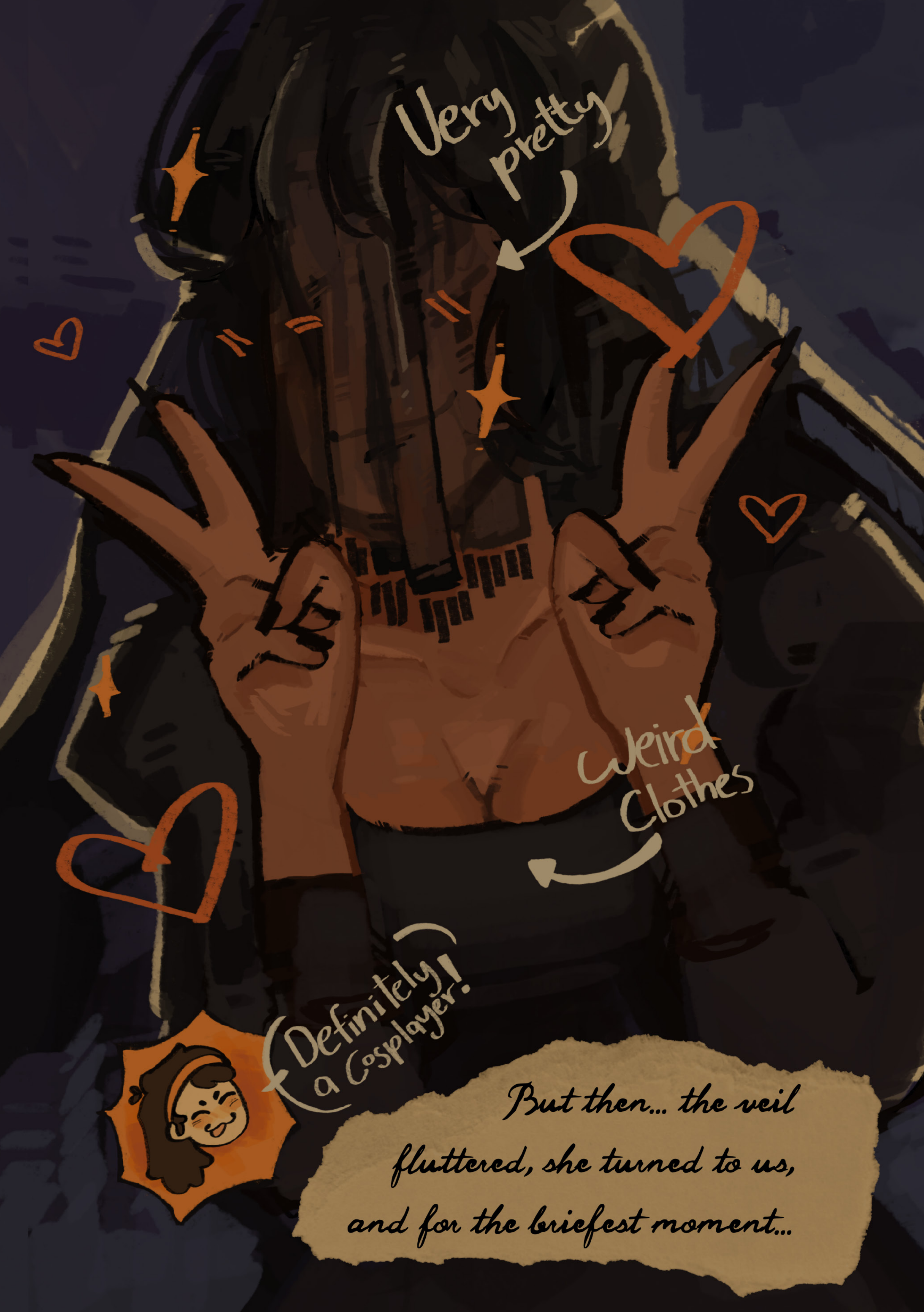
I had assumed the woman must be some kind of «cosplayer» like the ones Mabel had told me about.

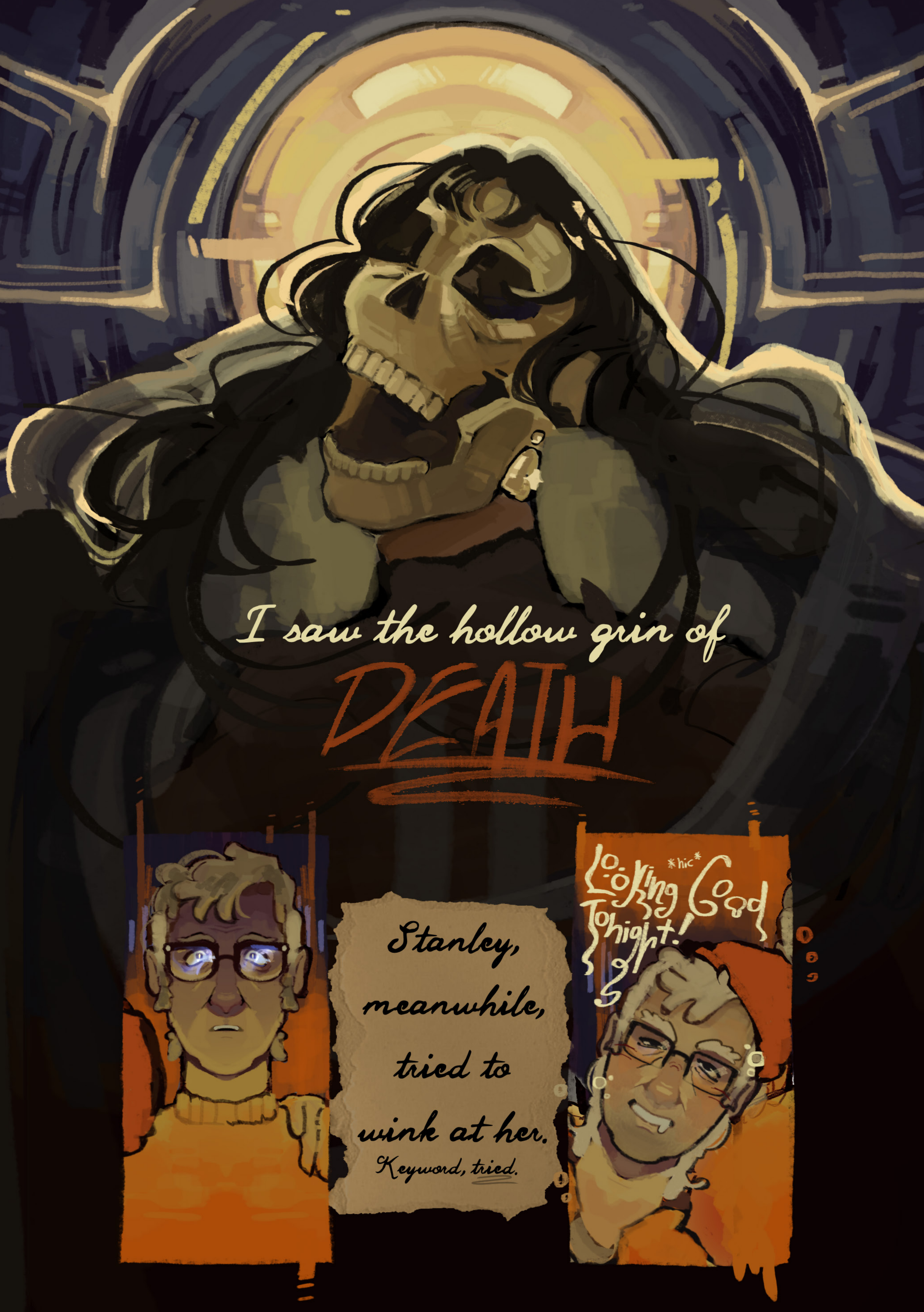


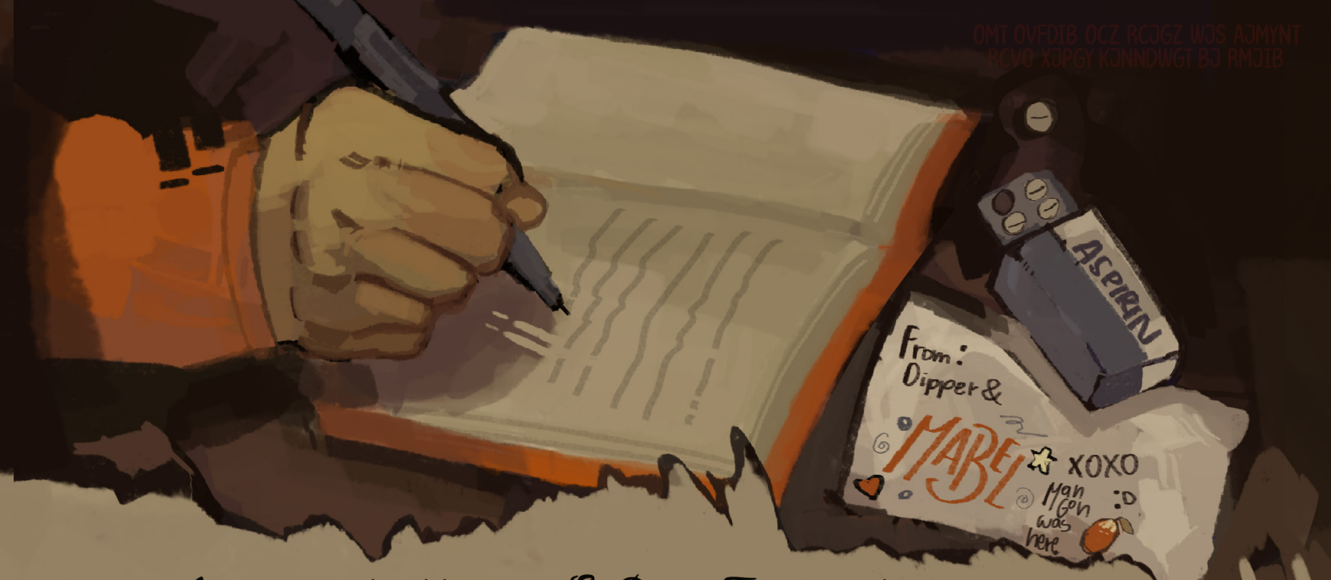
Still, it was a bit weird to see one of them at such late hours...

I politely greeted the woman, giving her one last look before turning. I just couldn't help but stare as she passed us.



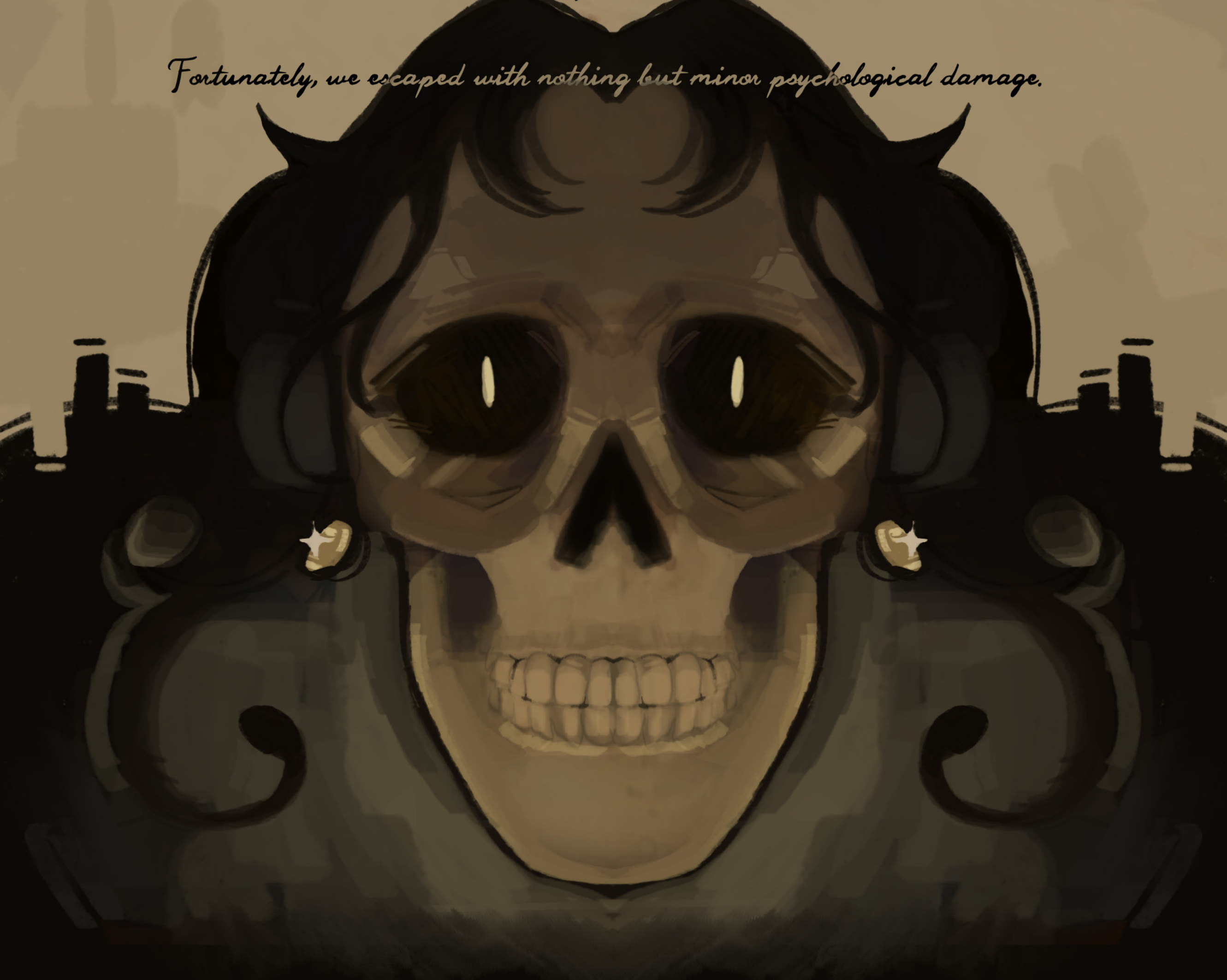

Very pretty
Weird Clothes
Definitely a Cosplayer!
But then... the veil fluttered, she turned to us, and for the briefest moment...

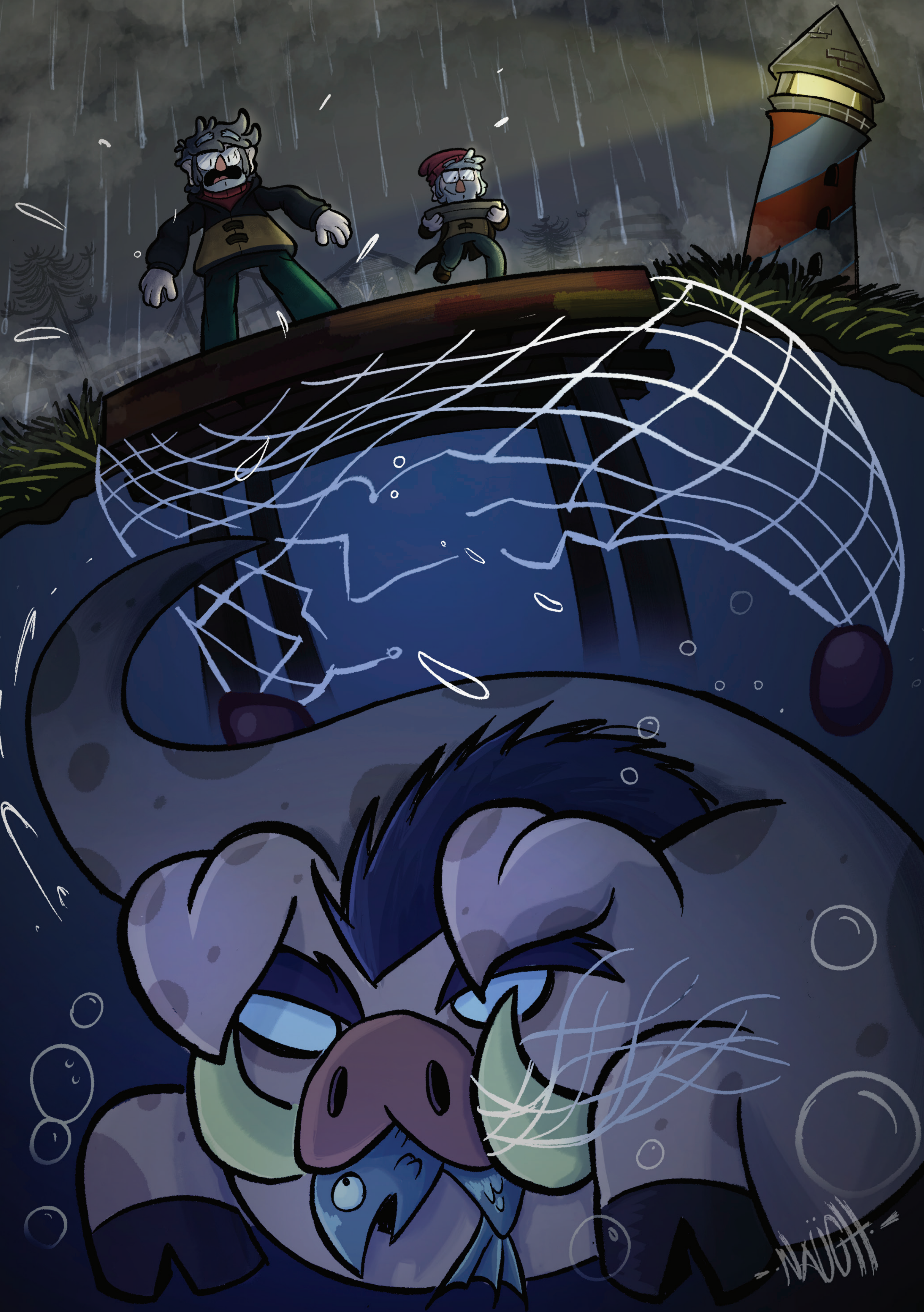

I saw the hollow grin of
DEATH
Stanley, meanwhile, tried to wink at her.
Keyword, tried.
Looking *hic* Good Tonight!


OMI OVFDIB OCZ RCJGZ WJS AJMYNT
RCVO XJPGY KJNNDWGT BJ RMJIB
ASPIRIN
From:
Dipper &
MABEL
XOXO
:D
Man Gon was here

According to local legend, «La Dama Tapada» lures wandering men by charming them with her beauty, only to later reveal her true, skeletal face once they fall under her spell. Depending on the version, she either scares them half to death or actually to death!
However, I would rather not find out which version is accurate.

Fortunately, we escaped with nothing but minor psychological damage.




NAÜGH

NOZVG NJPGN?
NJPIYN GDFZ HT ZS!

Luz Mala

One of the most popular legends in Argentina; a bright ball of light that appears mainly in desolate fields and forests.

It can remain motionless, move, or even haunt those who see it.

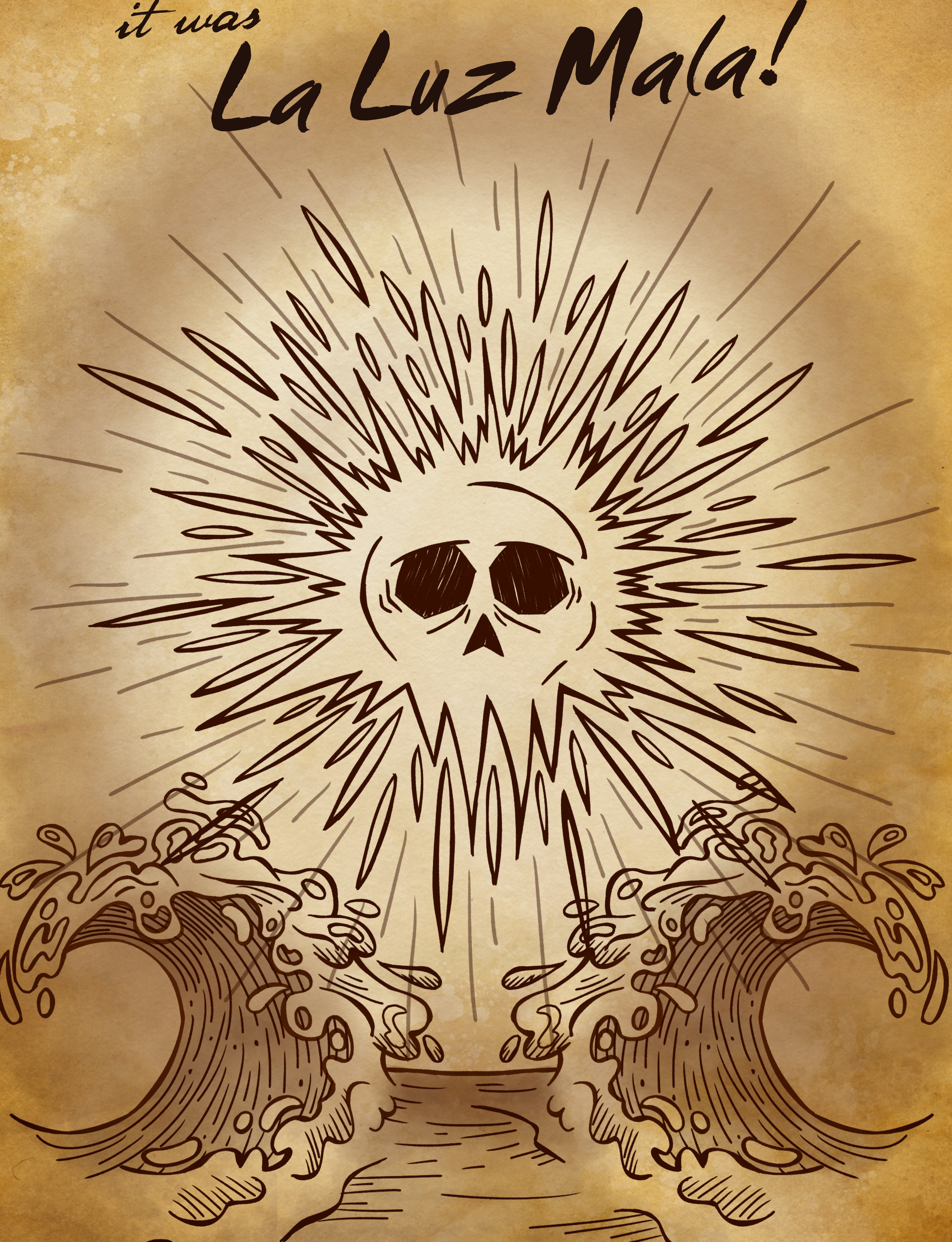
There are two types of Luz Mala: a soul that seeks peace, and a devil's lantern.

It's said that during June 26th, the light shines brighter due to an evil presence; it then takes advantage of the opportunity to torment people and steal their souls.

Unlike other witnesses who have encountered this cryptid, our encounter with it was... out of the ordinary.

It all started when we stopped in the small Argentinian coastal town "Mar del Tuyú" to rest and gather supplies before setting sail again the next day. While we strolled downtown to purchase our necessities, memories of our home in New Jersey came flooding back, making the trip somewhat nostalgic despite it being our first time visiting this place. It was as if we went back in time to when we were just kids, running down the boardwalk and basking in the salty air of the shoreline.

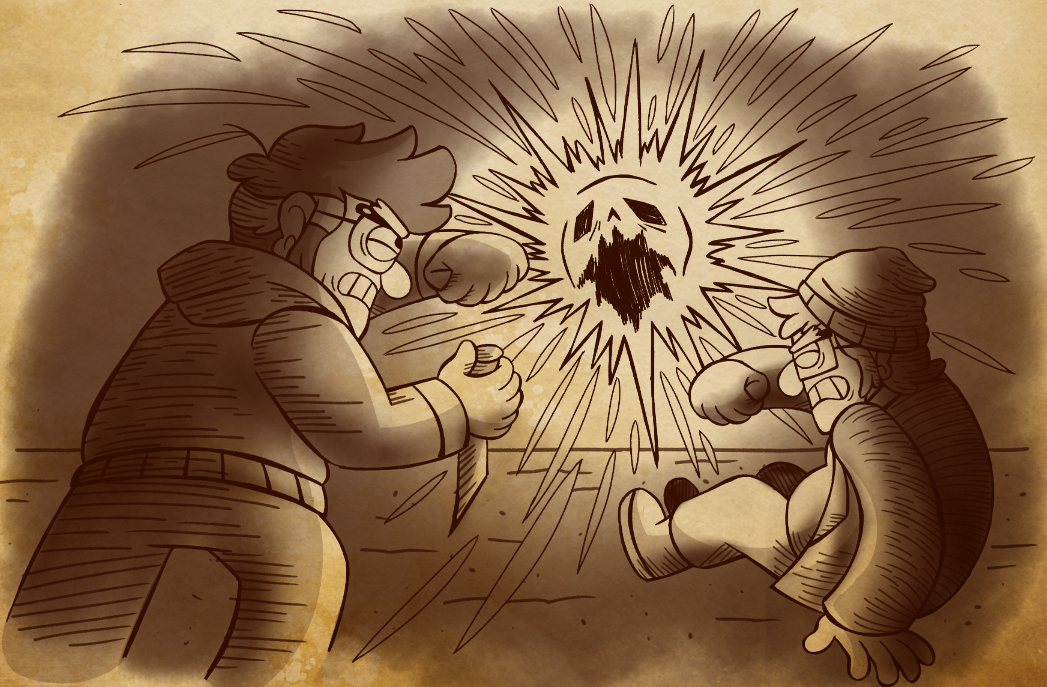
By nightfall we had everything gathered, so we returned to the beach we docked at. To our surprise, a strange light emerged from the sea and appeared before us...


it was
La Luz Mala!

I was rather confused; it was supposed to only appear in fields or forests, which clearly wasn't the case here. We tried to stay still, hoping it might just be a harmless spirit seeking peace, but after a few seconds, the light shone so intensely that it nearly blinded us before it lunged at us.

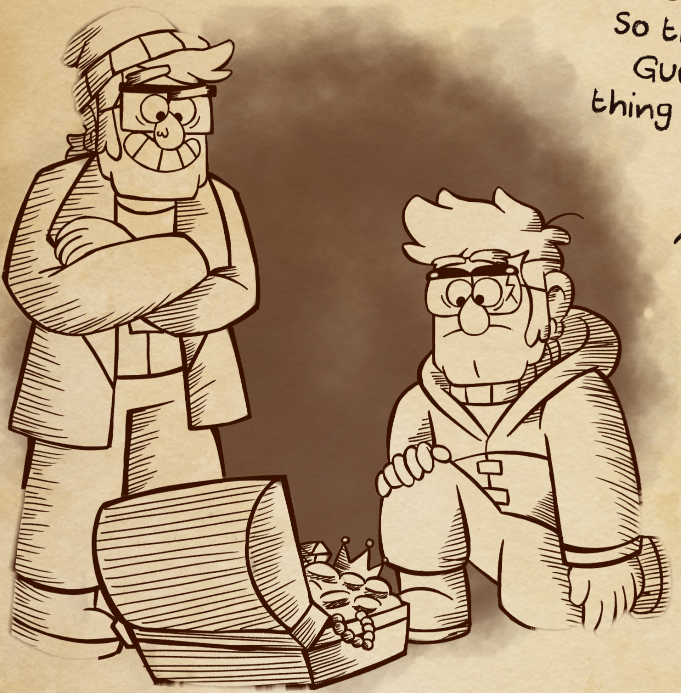
We ran as fast as we could until Stanley tripped over some branches and fell to the ground. He tried to get up; however, the sand seemed to be swallowing him. I quickly turned back to help, but the light approached him, shining brighter than ever as it opened its mouth to—I suspect—try to absorb his soul. I yelled at him to close his eyes for as long as he could. With a newly purchased sheath knife in one hand and the other hand held in front of me to shield the luminosity as best as possible, I pounced on it. It emitted a piercing scream as I stabbed it in its middle until it completely vanished, leaving only the two of us in darkness.

Detecting no signs of another potential encounter, I turned my attention towards Stanley. Luckily, he was unharmed. While helping him to his feet, he claimed that if he had his brass knuckles, he would have beaten La Luz Mala with a single hit. It made me laugh a little; even though I doubt it would have worked at all, I was relieved that he was okay.



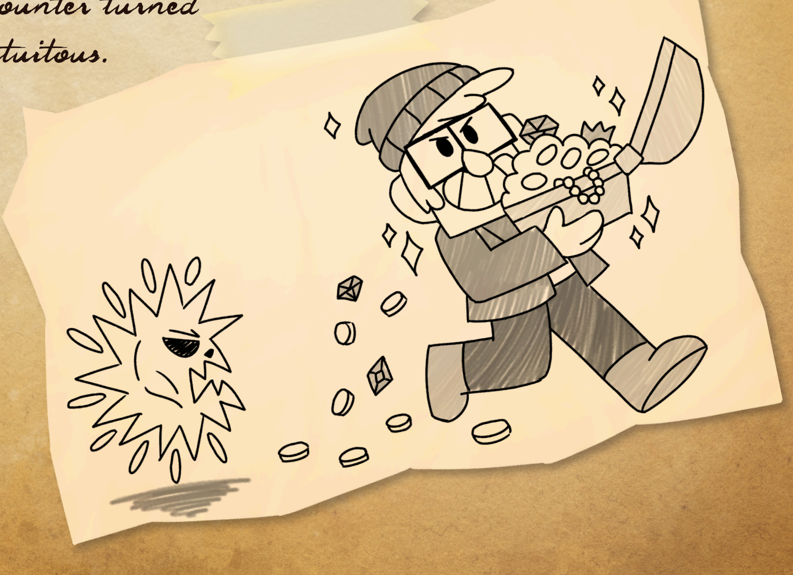
The next morning, I noticed a peculiar glow protruding from the sand in the same location where we fought the cryptid. At first, I was hesitant to go down there due to what we had experienced the prior night, but after a moment of thinking—and knowing that Stanley was still asleep at this time—I went out with a shovel and began to dig in the lucent spot.

To my amazement, it was a chest filled with jewels and rather old, tarnished gold.



"Hot tamales, free money! So this is what it was hiding! Guess me and that light thing are pretty similar, huh?" joked Stanley, who appeared unexpectedly beside me upon seeing what I'd unearthed.

In the end, this encounter turned out to be rather fortuitous.



Nostalgia's a &$★×✋⛵$★. That stroll downtown hit harder than I expected, because when we left I couldn't stop thinkin' about Jersey.

While we were there a couple weeks ago, we took a detour to Glass Shard Beach and visited Mom's grave. It was the first time I really got to do that, since I was pretending to be the wrong kid for so long.

Got me thinkin' about how I wanna go out. I'd like to be buried at sea, I think. No muss, no fuss, no ashes for the niblings to store in their closets.

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💣×🌲🌲$💀$★·

We also drove past the old school—haven't seen that place since the science fair. Dipper 'n Mabel will be that old in three years. Clever as they are, I can't imagine 'em bein' on their own like I was, or like Ford had to've been...

?& *⚡⚓$ #💣$&☾ ☾🔪#⛵× 🧨$*⛵·
🌲×'# 🌪&×%$ 🌀×&$*! 💣×★ 💣⚡#
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Ah, I'm really gettin' soft.

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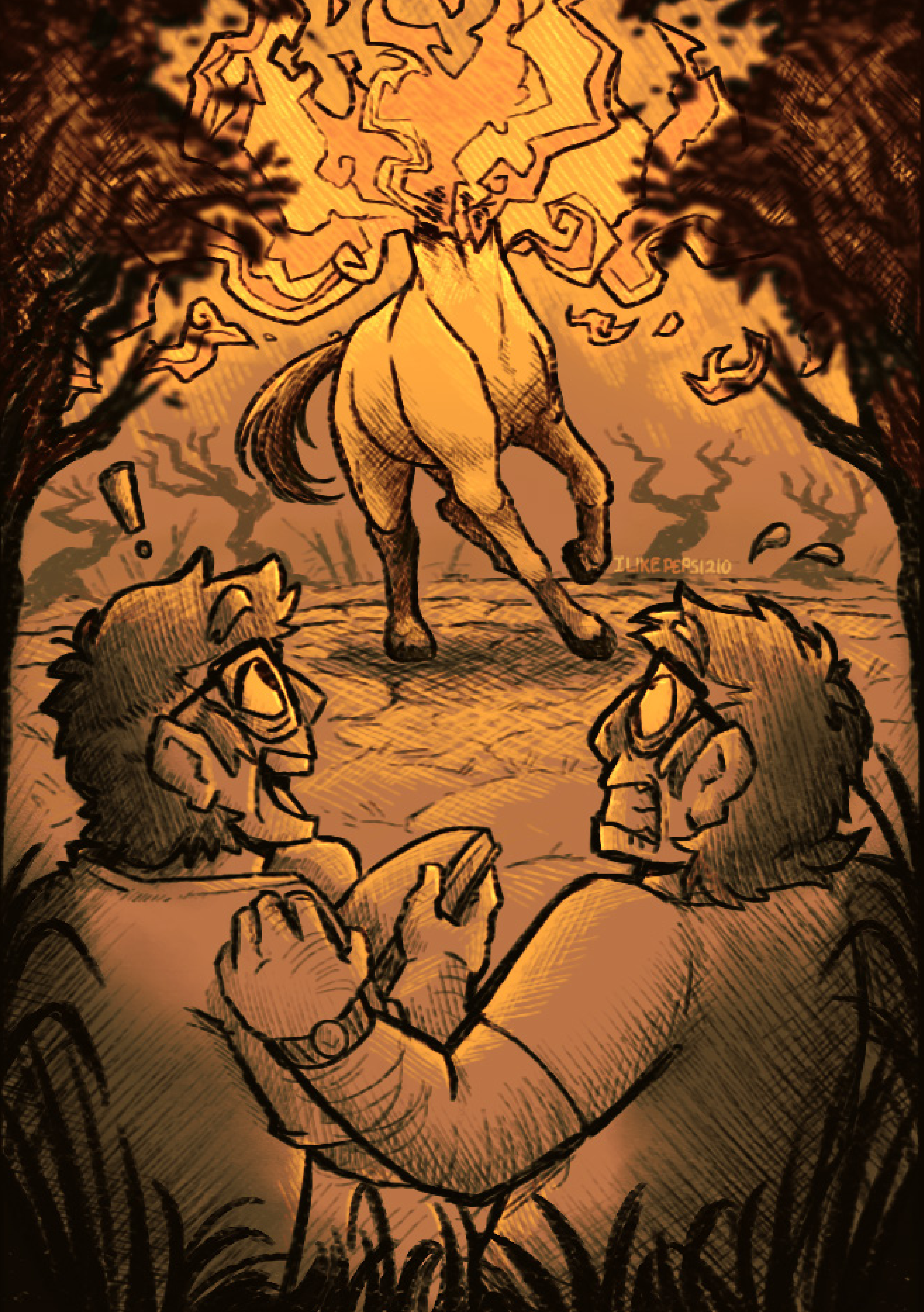


ILIKEPEPSI210

Secrets

[illegible]: Dee

I should have known it would come to this.

I recorded the first instances months ago, during the preparations. Back then, they were smaller—

Odd, yes; but it still held plausible deniability in front of him if I chose to look away and act as if nothing was wrong. Or—well, at least no more than usual. But now, ever since we set sail, it's only amplified. It's no longer something I can explain away, neither to myself nor others.

Something is **VERY** wrong.

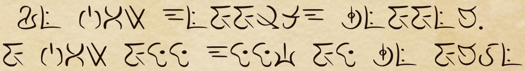
The pace of these... **EPISODES** frightens me. I've been watching Stanley closely, and he hasn't noticed—at least not yet—but I'm deeply concerned. I log every incident as carefully as I can, but I fear my notes may never keep pace with the speed of the decline.

Take this morning, for example.

The kids called us over video chat from Shermie's house. Naturally, he and his wife joined them briefly, and Stanley lit up instantly, so I know for a fact he was paying attention. At some point during the conversation, due to Mabel's natural gift, Shermie mentioned his own long life passion for golf.

Stanley chuckled at first, assuming it was some sort of joke; however, Shermie must've noticed something I didn't, and when he pressed, Stanley's amusement faltered. He looked utterly lost, as though he had no idea what our own brother was talking about. But Shermie said the same thing a week ago through this very same medium—that he still loves golfing, even if he's awfully terrible at it.

More than that—the last time we visited, the three of us went with the kids to the course! We even reminisced together about our childhood, how Shermie used to make me calculate the ball trajectory for him while Stanley was essentially the caddie when we played in front of our father's pawn shop, back when we were children. He had laughed at the memory, even reminded US about how Shermie—being the oldest—used bribery and debt against us like a tyrant banker, something that me and Shermie forgot about. It was a good day, I even thought...



Yet this time, when we tried to make him remember, there was no recognition. It seems there's whole chunks of time that are just... gone.

Shermie is worried too. He looked at me through the screen, searching for an explanation I couldn't share. That silent plea upset me more than I care to admit.

And it isn't just his memory that's declined. I've already written about his sleepwalking before, and while it was strange—and considerably scary—I didn't think it could get worse.

I was wrong.

Last night, I woke up and found him moving again, but when I watched more closely... his eyes were wide open. He was staring at nothing as he shuffled across the room, stopping briefly in front of my desk. I could hear the shuffling of pages, the frantic movement of the quill, and, like a coward, I couldn't move.

I stayed still, heart in my throat, and waited. He eventually returned to bed, snoring almost immediately, but when I turned I saw his eyes never closed.

In the morning, he made an idle complaint about his eyes feeling dry. I forced myself to laugh with him, but the truth is, the sight of him, unblinking in the darkness, shook me to my core.

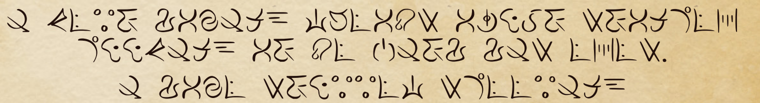
And then, of course, there's that damn song.

"We'll Meet Again."

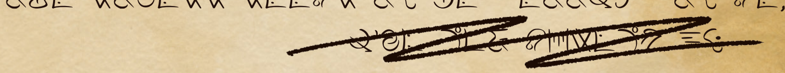
I've heard him hum it several times now, in different situations, completely unprompted. He acts as though it's simply just another tune...

But it isn't.

It's the sound of the beast, his cruel serenade. It's a THREAT. It can't be coincidence. It ISN'T coincidence. After all, what would be a greater punishment he could concoct for my "betrayal" than twisting my own brother into just another puppet for his old taunting?

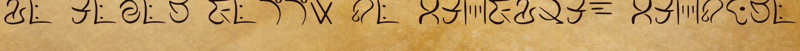


I've tried to keep things normal between us. If I let him see me panic, it will only make things worse, but it's getting harder not to flinch. Every day, there's something new going on. Every day, another piece comes loose from Stanley, I know it. And I know what could come next.



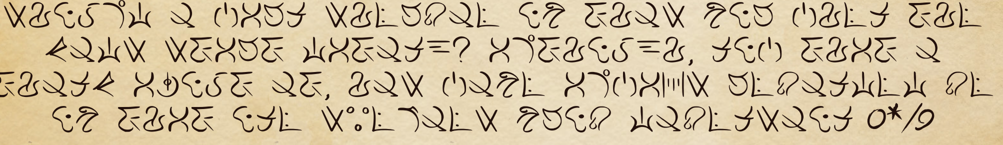
I'm afraid he's slipping further into the deep end every day, and I'm running out of time.

I've talked with him frequently—hard not to, in such a small boat in the middle of the ocean—to keep his mind with me, and I noticed something else. On quiet nights, with only the starry sky as a witness, I catch him staring into the horizon with a look I can't decipher. A deeply sad one. It's like he's waiting for something to happen, and I don't know what it is. He won't tell me.



I suppose we're not that different on that front, since I've been trying to gather information out of the cryptids we encounter without him noticing ever since we started this journey.

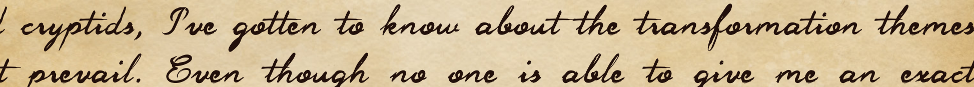
Some were less than helpful, although I can't entirely blame them for it. The Cegua, for instance, might've been more cooperative if she hadn't recognized Stanley. I've been told—after running non-stop for at least two miles—that they had... a complicated relationship of sorts, and while I don't understand how Stanley managed to pull it off, she's still bitter about how THAT ended. Thus, as soon as she saw him, she started hunting us across three regions. It seems questionable relationships may run in the Pines family.



Thankfully, a few others held less of a grudge. After piecing together what scraps I could, a name continued to surface: Xolotl.

An ancient entity that seems to be powerful enough to be the answer to our problems. From what I've gathered, it's largely associated with death. I won't let that deter me, since between locals and cryptids, I've gotten to know about the transformation themes that prevail. Even though no one is able to give me an exact location, every trail seems to circle back to the Xolotl—I was able to retrieve some of the stories I've heard across the multiverse, and I don't believe the similarities with the Axolotl are a coincidence. There's a connection there, I can **FEEL** it. I just need some help.

But I can't tell Stanley. If he knows I'm looking for something beyond our supposed "dream expedition," he'll want to know why. He'll—**RIGHTFULLY**—push for answers I cannot afford to give him. And it pains me to say, but if there's even a small chance I'm right, if Bill's somehow inside him, then giving him that knowledge might doom him.



I've started sealing my notes behind a new stronger, more intricate code. He can't read them. **THEY** can't, not this time. While it's a small comfort, I've made sure that even if they figure it out, Bill won't be able to crack it in time. And Stanley—well, I've always been a step ahead of him, haven't I?

I know I can protect us.

I know I can keep this under my control.

But then again... what if I'm wrong? What if this is it? What if Bill is back? What if I've already waited too long?

I can't—no, I **WON'T**—let that happen again. Not after everything Stanley has done for me. Not after I've only just gotten him back.

But unless I uncover something concrete about the Xolotl soon... I'll lose him.

I'll lose everything.

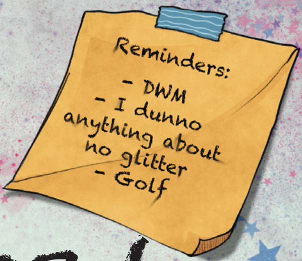
This has to work. I know it will.

Hey! Stop hoarding all the pens,
only ones I can find are outta ink.

Hm, perhaps we need
to stop for more supplies soon.
I do recall we're running low
on various toiletries as well.

SNACK RUN!

IMPORTANT supplies, Stanley.


Reminders:
- DWM
- I dunno anything about no glitter
- Golf

Memory Log 1

Author: Tinglecannon

Trigger warnings: *swearing*

Well, here I am. Writing in my own journal about weirdness and cryptids. Yeesh, I'm becoming more like Sixer the more we travel.

Anyway, I'm having trouble rememberin' stuff sometimes so I figured writing it down in one place would help.

So... today, I moved Ford's pens to the desk by the wheel. I keep telling him to stop leaving junk in the bathroom! It's damn cramped enough as is.

What else... oh the circled "DWM" on the calendar for later in the year is for "Dipper's Wrestling Meet"—don't miss it. Important.

Also if there seems to be more glitter on Sixer's side of the cabin, play dumb! I knew Mabel's letter was gonna be full of it so I shook some of it out on his side. Why, I may ask when I read this again later? He knows what he did.

#⛵?▲ #⛵$✕*⚡☠🌪 ☽! ✋✕☠★!

⛵? 🌪⚡%$ ⛵? ☽?☠#⛵$&#!

I ain't letting Ford off the hook on confessing about that deer thing to McGucket. I'm gonna tell him all about Ford screaming like a little girl!

Not me tho. That thing didn't creep me out at all. With its...way too long legs...or dead eyes...Brhhh...

Since Sixer kept makin' references to some dumb British show while we were running for our lives from a pack of rabbits, he's gotta watch all of *The Duchess Approves* with me now.

He seemed like he wanted me to watch his thing too, after. And since I'm such a nice guy, I will.

But only because Dipper apparently likes that show. Which means Mabel and I can ridicule it properly later. Alpha twins!

Note to self: The next time Sixer wants to drag you into the freakin' jungle, stay on the boat. We're lucky that shape-shifter thing was nice enough to lead us out rather than try and eat us.

Hey wait...this is *MY* journal. I can write whatever I want, I can use real curse words! Like a true sailor! Yeah!

Heh, yeah, ok... maybe I'll keep it in check for now. Good habit for when the kids are around. Once they're 21 tho, drinks and swearing contests are *ON!* And those kids are going *DOWN.*

I definitely drank too much, but Sixer was going on about me trying to hook up with death or something? What the hell does that even mean?

I swear he's always so judgemental over the women I flirt with. And considering *HIS* track record it's real rich comin' from him.

That ball of light thing that tried to attack me really aggravated the daily migraines I've been getting... there've been bright spots in my vision for the last two days now and my eye hurts like~~a~~ fu mother.

And nothing's been helping either...

Not sure how much longer I can keep Ford in the dark about 'em. ~~Or. The other th~~ing. The fact I know he almost got arrested in the metro way back in Mexico for being a weirdo. And if you read this Sixer, *I WILL* tell Shermie and then you can *FINALLY* be the one to suffer that damned LOOK he gives when he thinks you did something stupid.

Tho, I guess to Shermie, he did give you that look a lot the last 30 years. Heh. Or maybe he's an even better actor than me... older brothers, am I right?

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#⛵?🌲. #?☽$⛵💣⚡☠🌪 👓⚡⛵💣 ×☠ ⚡☠×🌲🌲&?🌲&⚡×⛵$
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Shermie likes golf.
Mini and regular.

Sucks at both.

Remember that this time.

??⚓ 🔪🌲 🌪?🧨 🌲🔪☠#

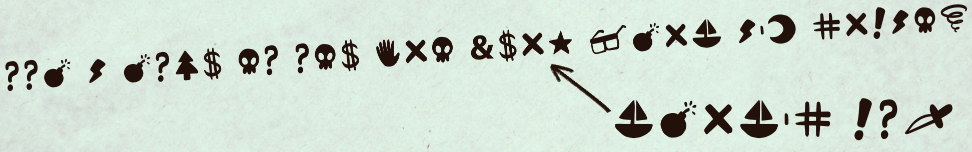
My stomach is still killin' me after that cheap grub, but how could I resist those kinda prices? Sure, last time I ate cheap grub that messed with my stomach I landed in the hospital with a ghost lady, but that was just a fluke.

...

...

I don't know how you do this, Sixer. Feels so... *WEIRD*. Talkin' to myself but on paper instead of out loud.

Well, while I'm addressing you... I can read the damn code, Ford. I could the entire [redacted] damn time. You gotta stop talkin' about me in it if you wanna keep your thoughts private. I mean, really, look at how your last journals went—Dipper and Mabel figured out the invisible ink trick, and Dipper read that thing cover to cover who knows how many times. You think I can't *ALSO* figure out some new code?



You gotta be real stressed these days if you're underestimating me this bad... And ...I'm. ~~so sor...dammit~~ ~~Stan be a man~~. **sorry**. There. I said it—er, wrote it, whatever. Sorry.

There's more I need to tell you but for now I need to get to bed. My head's poundin' right behind my eye worse than usual.

Man-Eating Bats

Last night, Stanley and I visited some of the many bars that Gibraltar has to offer.

After... a **LOT** of drinking (I counted **AT LEAST** 10 pubs down Main Street alone!), we headed to the Upper Rock Area for some quiet (and to sober up).

Stanley complained something kept biting him. I brushed him off until I was bitten myself, though the culprit's teeth were unable to penetrate through my coat.

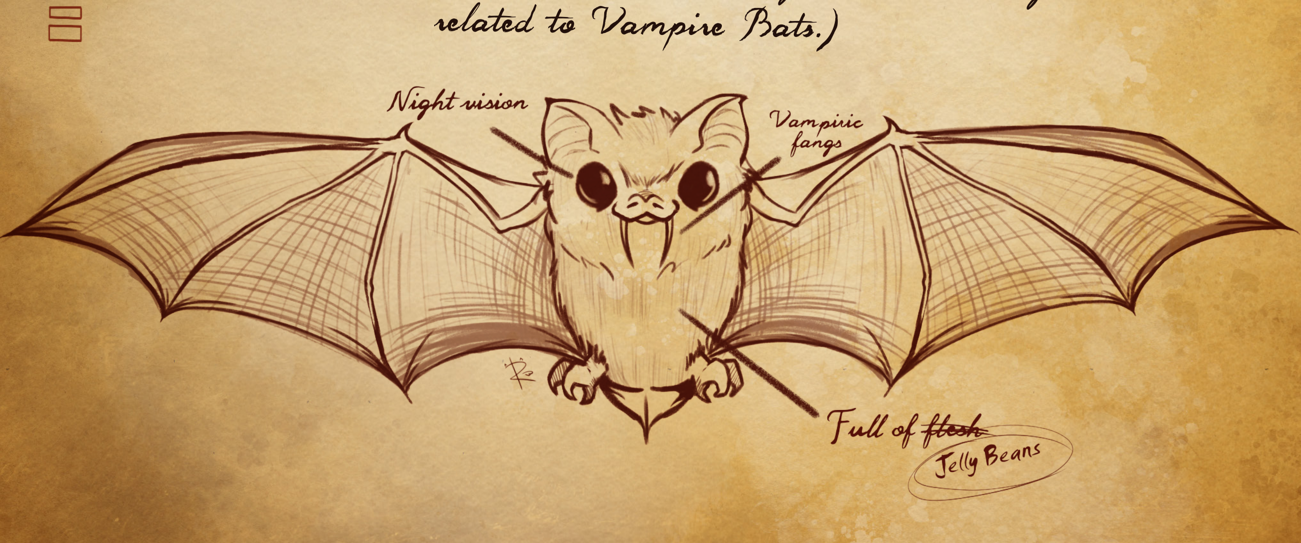
It turns out a local story about man-eating bats that only emerge during a full moon was true!

However, some of the details are inaccurate.

The bats are depicted as huge, terrifying monsters. Instead, these pesky creatures are similarly sized to another native bat species—the Soprano Pipistrelle (Pipistrellus Pygmaeus).

These tiny bats sport massive, jet black, beady eyes with truly excellent night-vision, and large, vampire-like fangs capable of ripping chunks of flesh from exposed areas of those unfortunate (or stupid) enough to venture up here during a full moon.

(**NOTE**: As far as I'm aware, they are **NOT** closely related to Vampire Bats.)



Though they do swarm, they're quite easy to befriend when offered a suitable alternative to flesh. I discovered this when one found its way into my coat pocket and gladly gorged itself on the bag of jellybeans I had, favouring the red ones. A few even accepted a child-shaped British candy called 'Jelly Babies', again favouring the red ones! (Likely associating the color with flesh.)

The bats quickly fled at sunrise. Hopefully we'll find them again during the next full moon (sans the excessive drinking, of course) and perhaps even locate their nest-site; it's likely somewhere inside the Rock or within cracks on dilapidated buildings.

December 6th

A month has passed and, with the presence of a full moon, I decided to attempt tracing the bats to their nest-site.

Stanley opted to stay behind. When I asked if he was scared, he immediately denied it, stating, quote, "I don't want to walk all the way up there again. It's all hills and I'm old and my legs hurt just thinking about it." ~~I don't believe him.~~

No matter. I simply had to go it alone.

Clad in my coat, and carrying plenty of jelly beans and Jelly Babies, I made my way to where we found the Man-Eating Bats. From there, I lured a group with the candy and followed as they flew off with their 'prey' to the Mediterranean Steps—a long staircase built into the Rock that snakes up towards several caves along the summit.

It was a long walk, and given the aged steps and unstable terrain, a difficult one. However, once at the top, I eventually discovered their nest-site! Success!

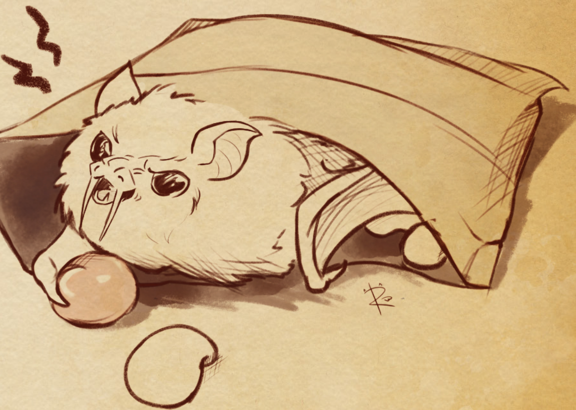
The cave most favoured by the Man-Eating Bats appeared to be the aptly named Spider Cave, which houses a population of the Gibraltar Funnel-Web Spider (Macrothele Calpeiana).

Much as I was loath to disturb them, I simply had to know more, and ventured inside.

I found that the bats swarm their prey, engaging in feeding frenzy-like behaviour and stripping their target clean of all flesh. That's precisely what they attempted to do to me! ...Or so I thought.

The little buggers instead burrowed their way into my pockets, once again seeking out the candy I carried.

In order to avoid any hitching a ride back to the boat, I removed all the packets I was carrying (including the one I'd intended to keep for myself) and emptied them onto the ground. The gesture seemed to be appreciated as the bats quickly devoured the lot, leaving me alone long enough to start the trek back.



GR QRW VKRZ PDEHO.
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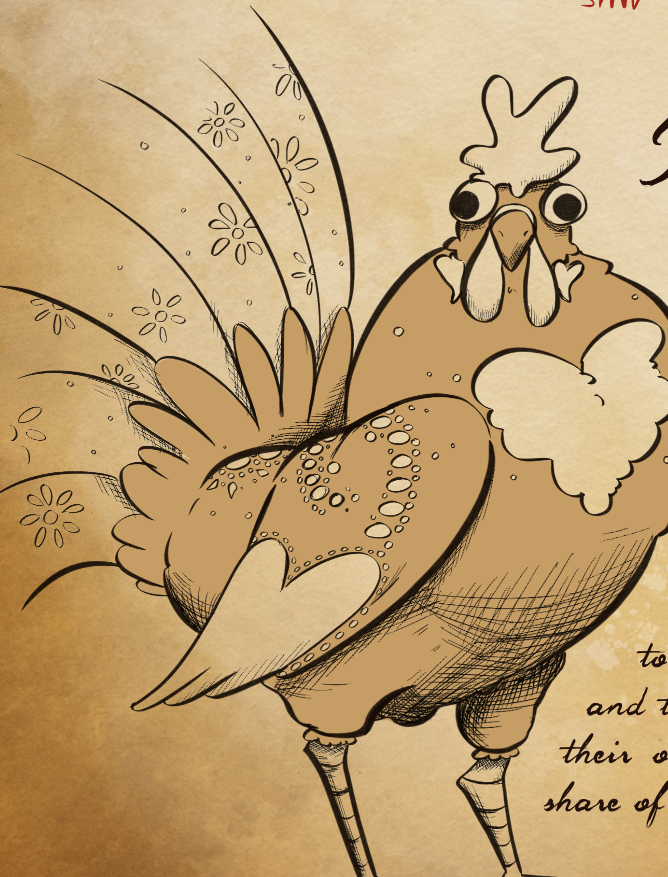


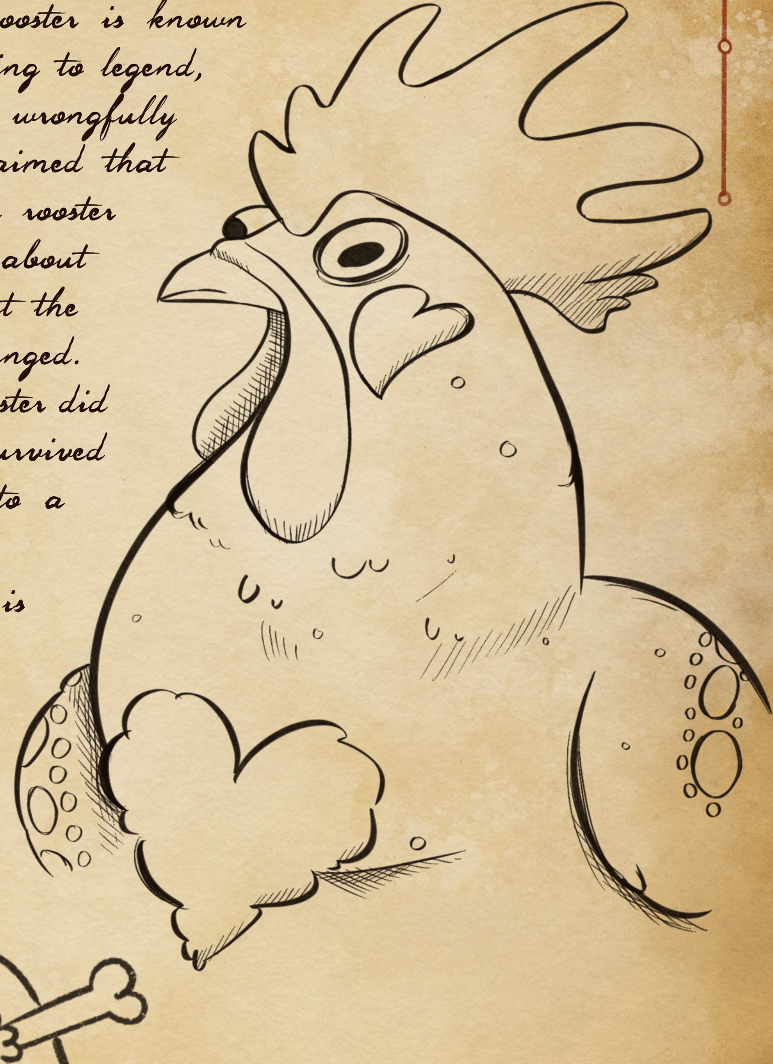
The Rooster

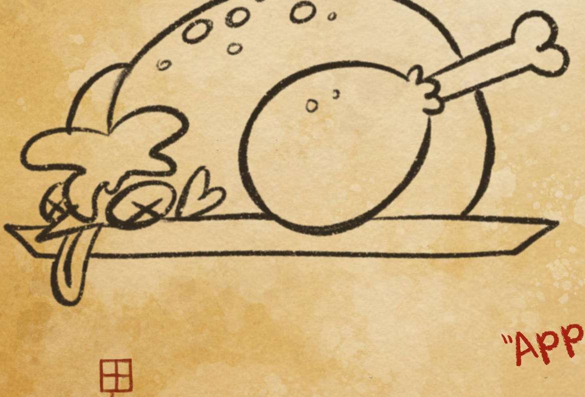
Recently we came across a rather colorful rooster that we suspected to have been painted in such striking colors. I theorized the animal to have some sort of virus, but Stanley claims someone must have painted it 'funky' colors to get money from poor passersby, and that it ultimately ran away from their owner when they didn't get their share of the pay—he sounds as though he speaks from experience.

Stan has been attempting to convince me to allow him to cook it, but this is much too fascinating of a specimen to eat!

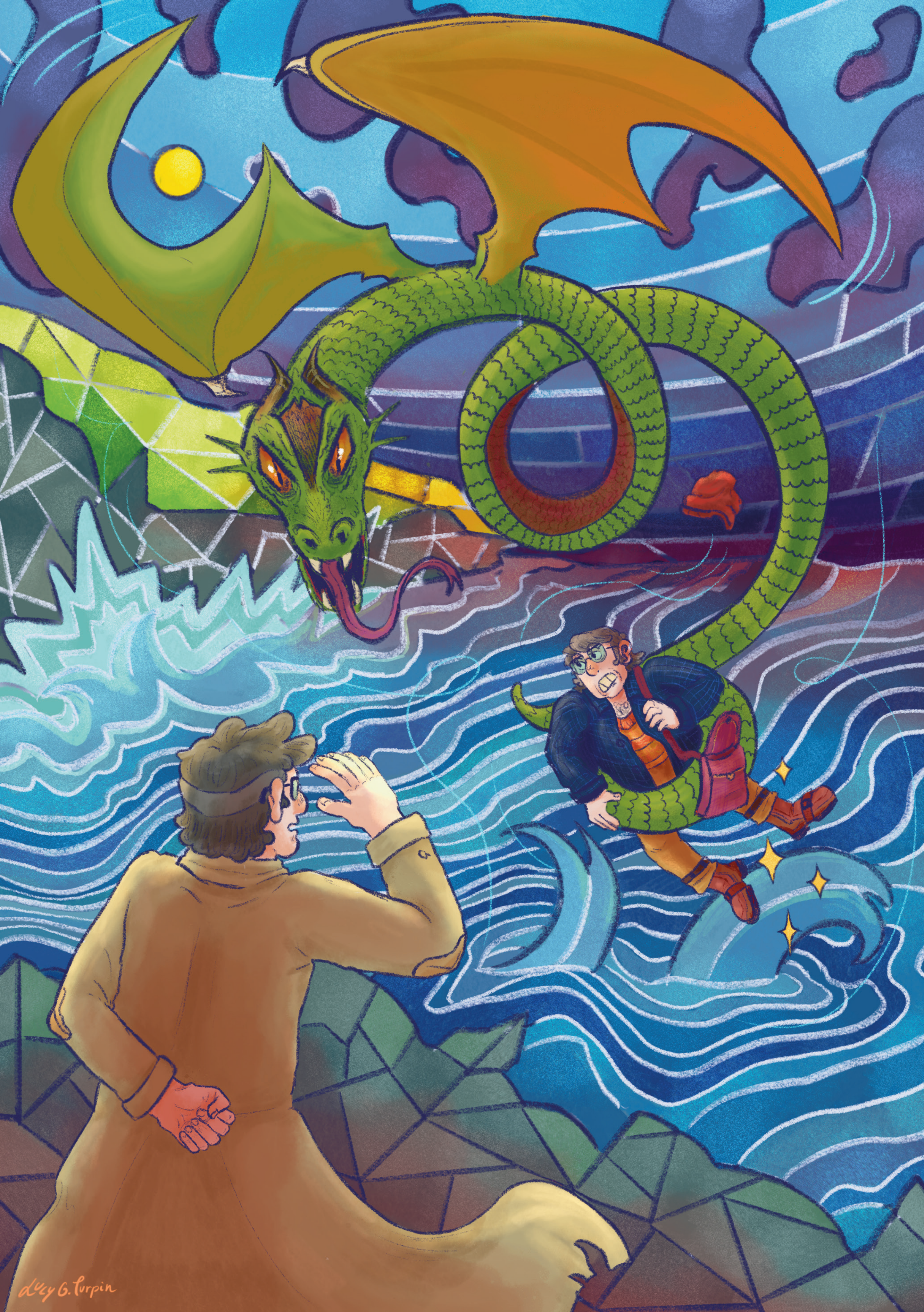
After some investigation around town, we have found the rooster is known as 'Barcelo's'. According to legend, a man who had been wrongfully accused of a theft claimed that if he was innocent, a rooster (which the judge was about to eat) would crow at the moment he was hanged. Needless to say, the rooster did crow and the man survived the hanging thanks to a poorly made knot.

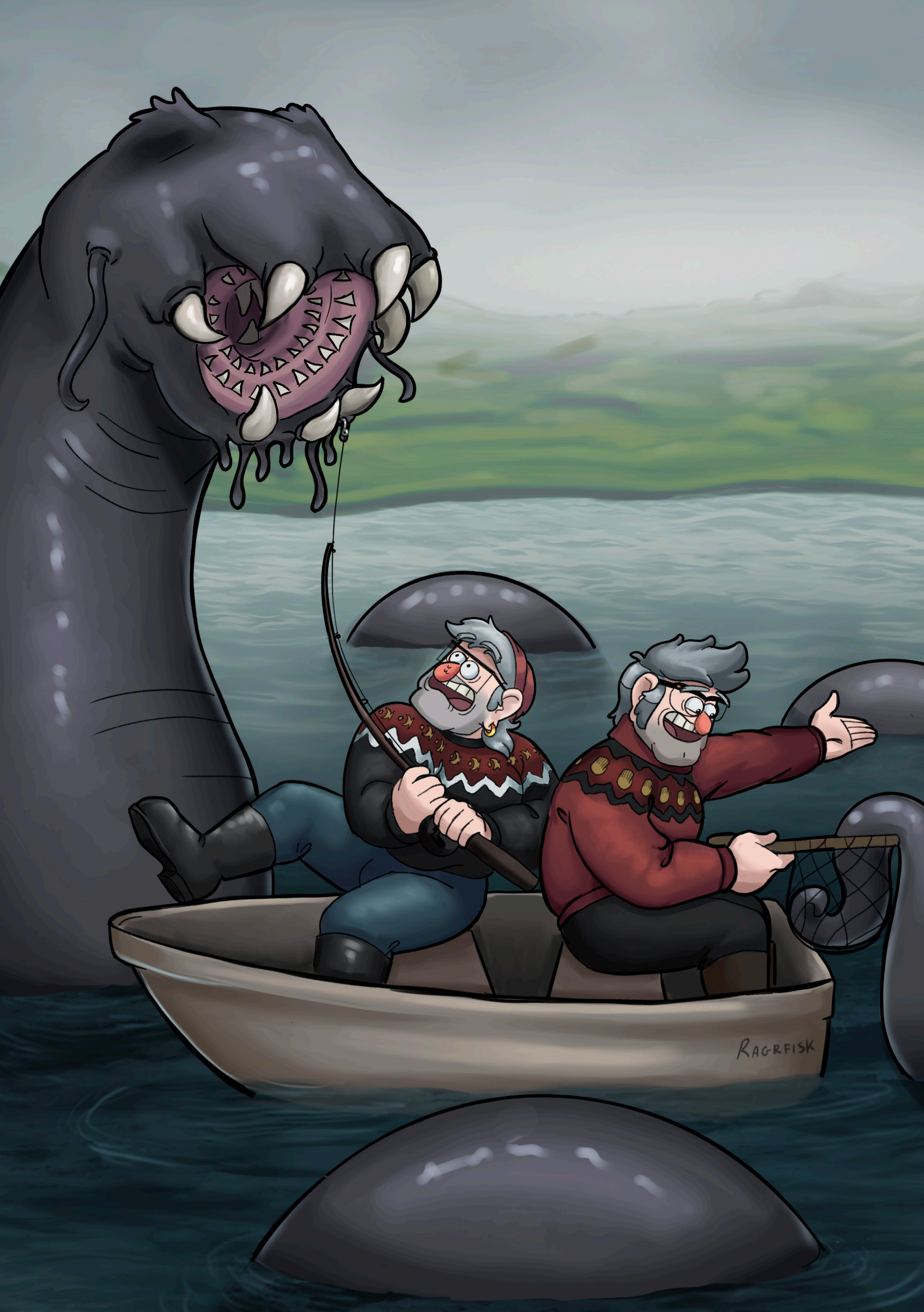
Although this is a popular myth, the town's folk don't seem to have ever actually seen the rooster...much less believe in it.



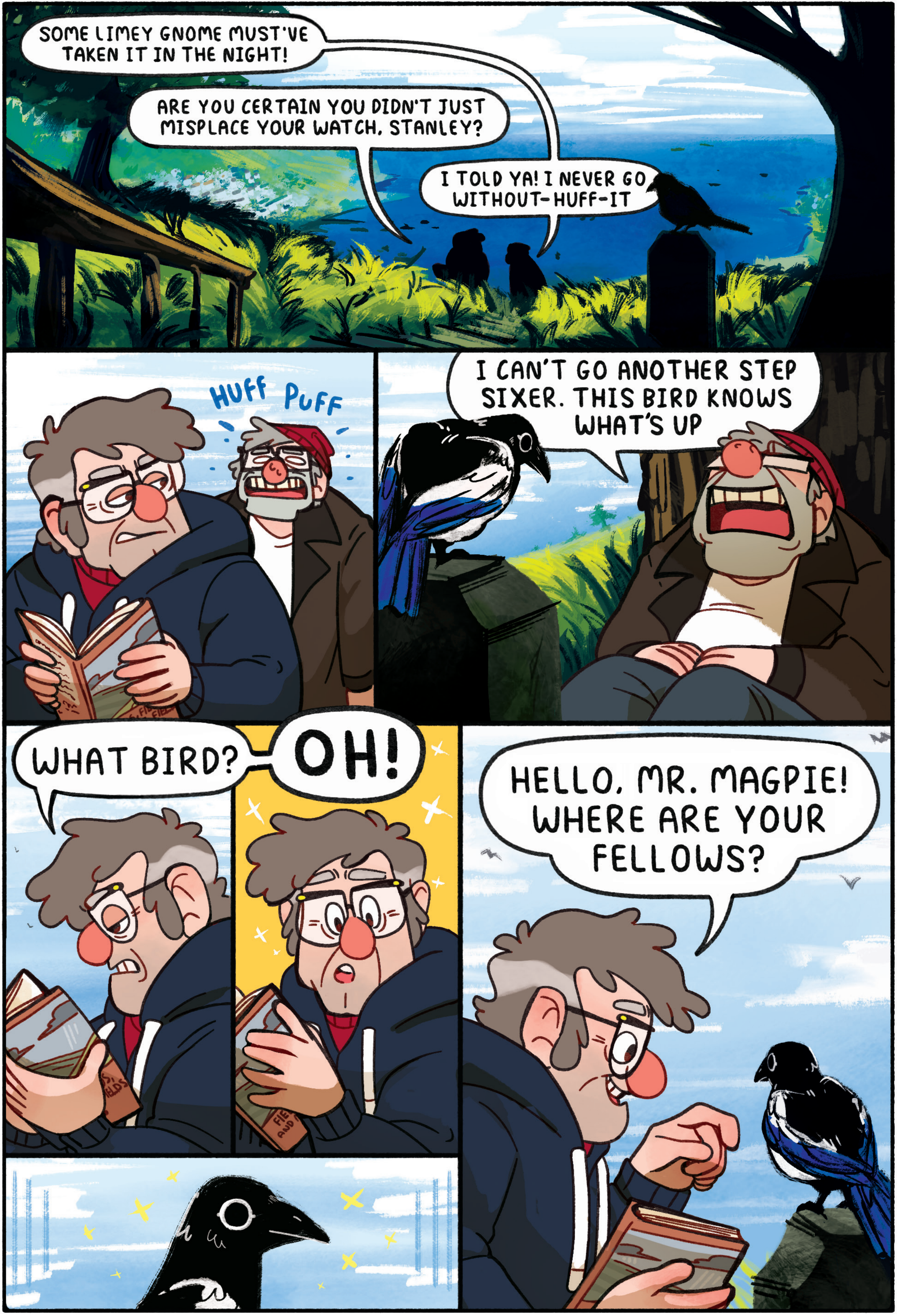


"This ****** cock"
"Apparently cock-a-doodle-do here is có-coró-có"
"I was feeling PECKish HAH!"
"Cluck that guy"
"Time for chicken piri piri"

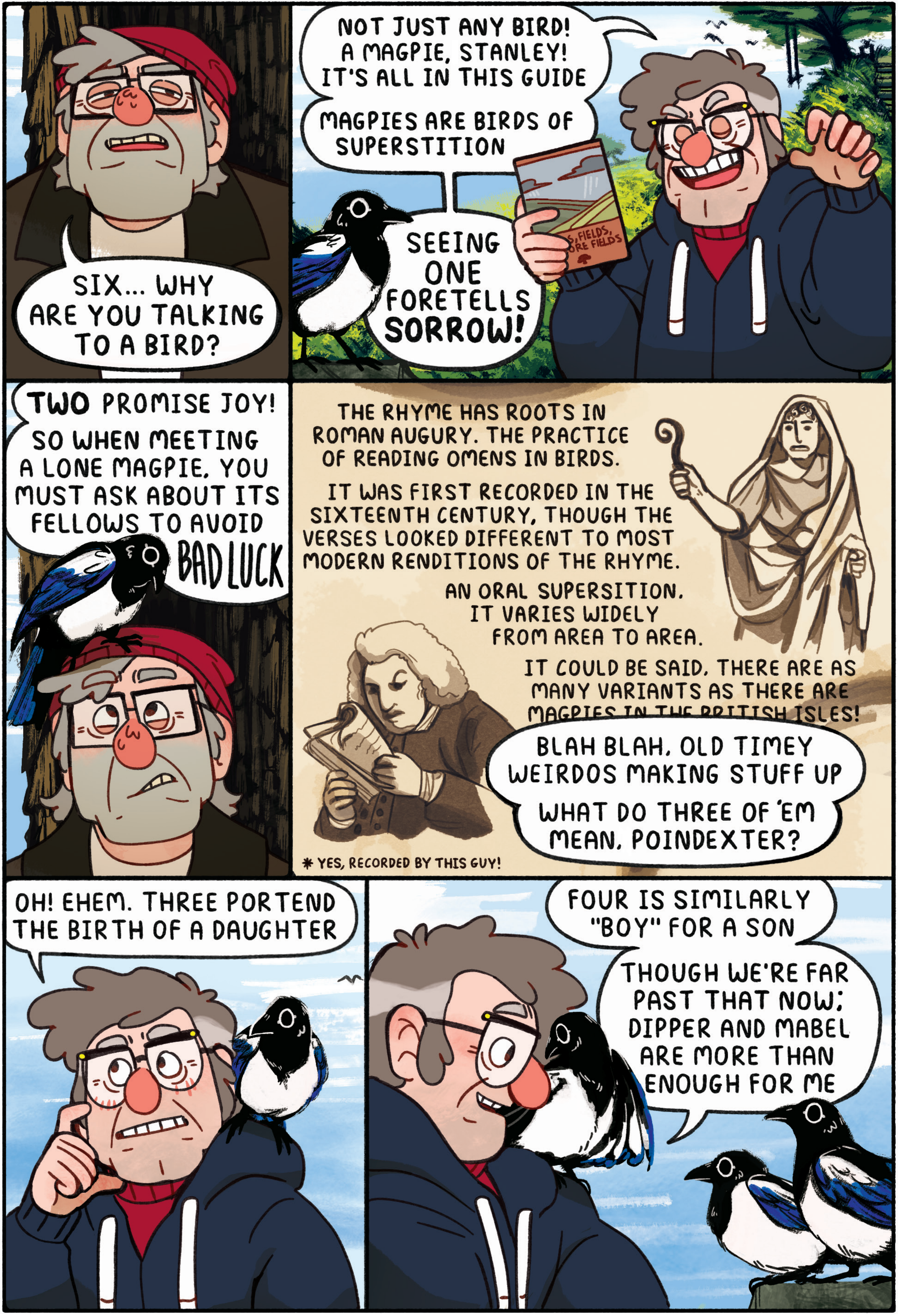

Lucy G. Turpin


RAGRFISK

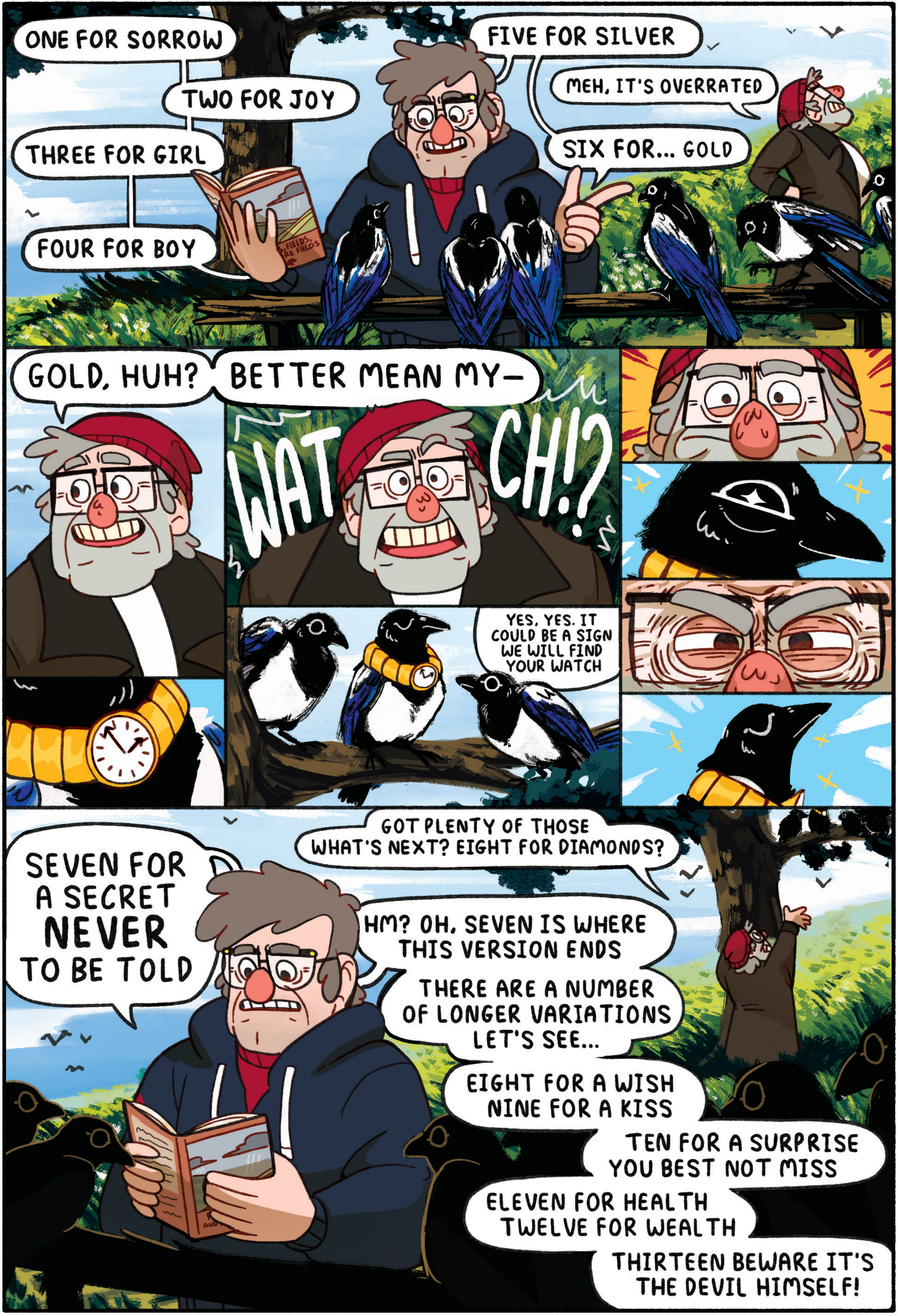
PAINTEDCROWS

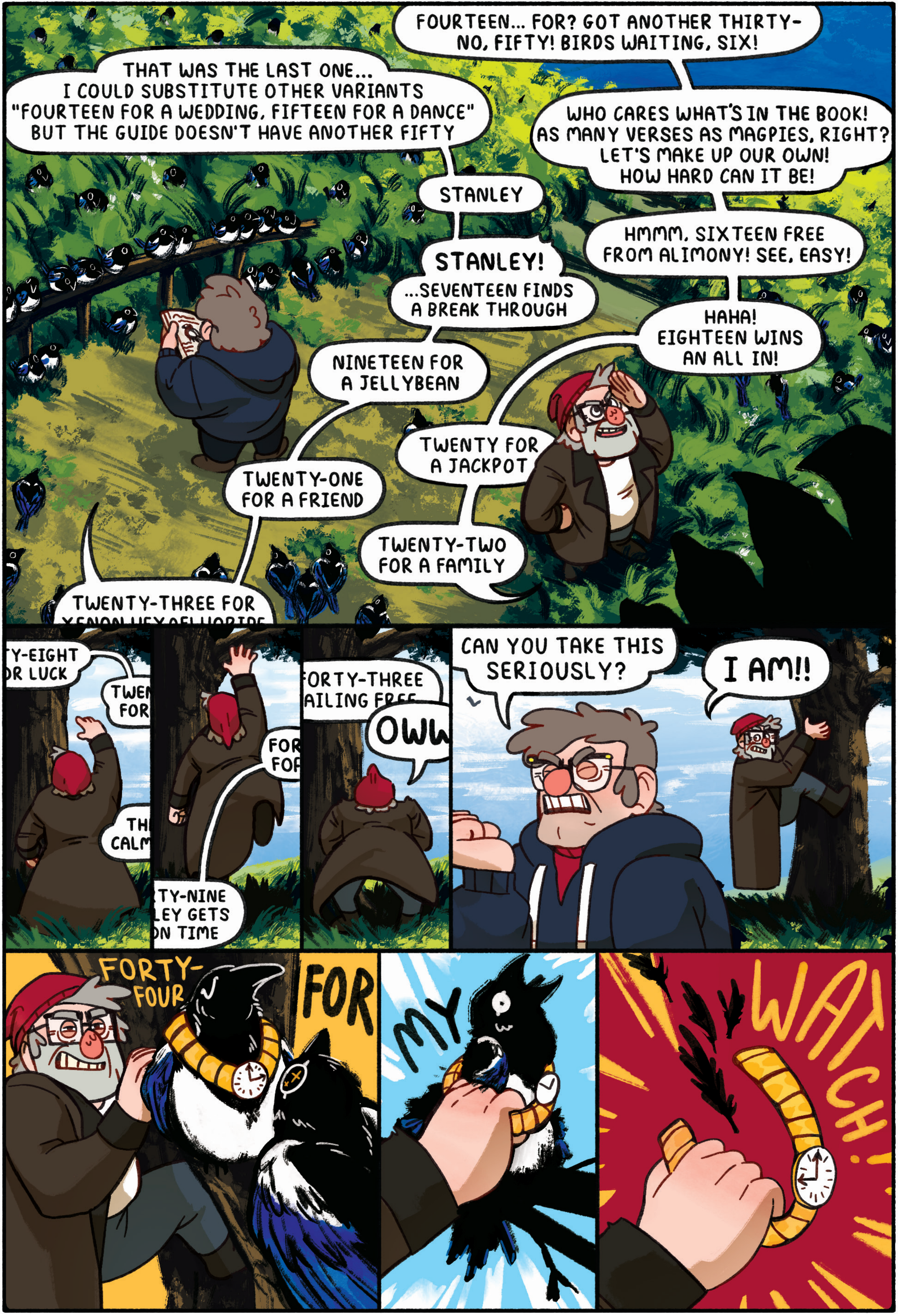

SOME LIMEY GNOME MUST'VE TAKEN IT IN THE NIGHT!
ARE YOU CERTAIN YOU DIDN'T JUST MISPLACE YOUR WATCH, STANLEY?
I TOLD YA! I NEVER GO WITHOUT-HUFF-IT
HUFF PUFF
I CAN'T GO ANOTHER STEP SIXER. THIS BIRD KNOWS WHAT'S UP
WHAT BIRD?
OH!
HELLO, MR. MAGPIE! WHERE ARE YOUR FELLOWS?

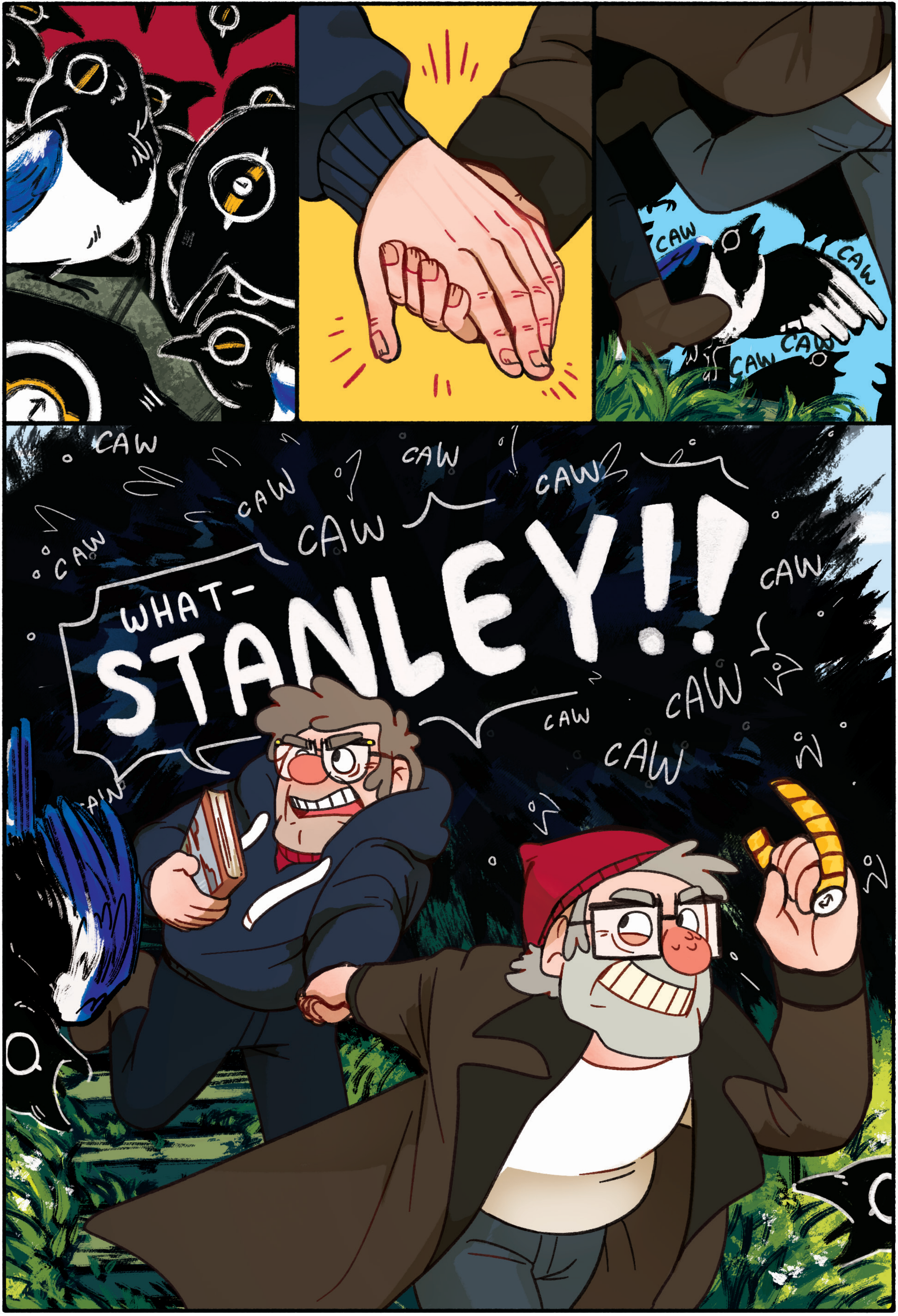
PAINTEDCROWS


SIX... WHY ARE YOU TALKING TO A BIRD?
NOT JUST ANY BIRD! A MAGPIE, STANLEY! IT'S ALL IN THIS GUIDE
MAGPIES ARE BIRDS OF SUPERSTITION
SEEING ONE FORETELLS SORROW!
TWO PROMISE JOY!
SO WHEN MEETING A LONE MAGPIE, YOU MUST ASK ABOUT ITS FELLOWS TO AVOID BAD LUCK
THE RHYME HAS ROOTS IN ROMAN AUGURY. THE PRACTICE OF READING OMENS IN BIRDS.
IT WAS FIRST RECORDED IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY, THOUGH THE VERSES LOOKED DIFFERENT TO MOST MODERN RENDITIONS OF THE RHYME.
AN ORAL SUPERSITION, IT VARIES WIDELY FROM AREA TO AREA.
IT COULD BE SAID, THERE ARE AS MANY VARIANTS AS THERE ARE MAGPIES IN THE BRITISH ISLES!
BLAH BLAH, OLD TIMEY WEIRDOS MAKING STUFF UP
WHAT DO THREE OF 'EM MEAN, POINDEXTER?
* YES, RECORDED BY THIS GUY!
OH! EHEM. THREE PORTEND THE BIRTH OF A DAUGHTER
FOUR IS SIMILARLY "BOY" FOR A SON
THOUGH WE'RE FAR PAST THAT NOW; DIPPER AND MABEL ARE MORE THAN ENOUGH FOR ME

PAINTEDCROWS


ONE FOR SORROW
TWO FOR JOY
THREE FOR GIRL
FOUR FOR BOY
FIVE FOR SILVER
MEH, IT'S OVERRATED
SIX FOR... GOLD
GOLD, HUH?
BETTER MEAN MY–
WATCH!?
YES, YES. IT COULD BE A SIGN WE WILL FIND YOUR WATCH
SEVEN FOR A SECRET NEVER TO BE TOLD
GOT PLENTY OF THOSE WHAT'S NEXT? EIGHT FOR DIAMONDS?
HM? OH, SEVEN IS WHERE THIS VERSION ENDS
THERE ARE A NUMBER OF LONGER VARIATIONS LET'S SEE...
EIGHT FOR A WISH NINE FOR A KISS
TEN FOR A SURPRISE YOU BEST NOT MISS
ELEVEN FOR HEALTH TWELVE FOR WEALTH
THIRTEEN BEWARE IT'S THE DEVIL HIMSELF!


THAT WAS THE LAST ONE...
I COULD SUBSTITUTE OTHER VARIANTS
"FOURTEEN FOR A WEDDING, FIFTEEN FOR A DANCE"
BUT THE GUIDE DOESN'T HAVE ANOTHER FIFTY
FOURTEEN... FOR? GOT ANOTHER THIRTY- NO, FIFTY! BIRDS WAITING, SIX!
WHO CARES WHAT'S IN THE BOOK! AS MANY VERSES AS MAGPIES, RIGHT? LET'S MAKE UP OUR OWN! HOW HARD CAN IT BE!
STANLEY
HMMM, SIXTEEN FREE FROM ALIMONY! SEE, EASY!
STANLEY!
...SEVENTEEN FINDS A BREAK THROUGH
HAHA! EIGHTEEN WINS AN ALL IN!
NINETEEN FOR A JELLYBEAN
TWENTY FOR A JACKPOT
TWENTY-ONE FOR A FRIEND
TWENTY-TWO FOR A FAMILY
TWENTY-THREE FOR XENON HEXAFLUORIDE
TY-EIGHT
DR LUCK
TWEN
FOR
THI
CALM
FOR
FOR
TY-NINE
LEY GETS
ON TIME
ORTY-THREE
AILING FREE
OWW
CAN YOU TAKE THIS SERIOUSLY?
I AM!!
FORTY-FOUR
FOR
MY
WATCH!


CAW
CAW
CAW
CAW
CAW
CAW
CAW
CAW
CAW
CAW
WHAT- STANLEY!!
CAW
CAW
CAW
CAW

Water under the bridge

Author: Quin | *Spots:* Roo

The canal was still, its surface flat as black glass. Around it, the city leaned in close, rows of narrow houses stitched together, the light from the windows glowing amber in the dark. Some were lit and movement and faint noises of conversations or televisions could be heard; others stayed dark and silent behind lace curtains and half-closed blinds.

A single bicycle wheel stuck out from the edge of the water. It spun gently in the night breeze, ticking like a distant clock. Some teens probably had thrown it into the water, maybe as a prank or revenge, maybe because they just wanted to make someone's day worse. It didn't matter; everywhere you looked there were more bikes. The owner could just take another one.

Somewhere, faintly, a church bell chimed the hour: eleven.

The Stan O'War II floated in place, moored to a rusted iron ring along the edge of the water. Traces of faint light exited from behind the curtains, and sometimes Stan's voice or laughter rang out; other than that it seemed not that different from all the other boats that drifted in the water.

"No is no, Stanley. And that's final." Ford leaned against the small kitchen counter, his arms crossed as he looked at his brother with an unimpressed look. "Yes, we may be in Amsterdam and the city has its… fame for a reason, but that is not why we're here. We are here to study potential anomalies within the algae."

"Oh, come on, Sixer, I thought you enjoyed experiencing local cultures?" Stan shot back with a grin. He put his elbow on the table then rested his chin in his hand.

"Emphasis on 'culture,' Stanley; that sort of stuff hardly qualifies as 'culture'. If you would like to actually go out to a museum with me for once—" Ford trailed off, only for Stan to interrupt.

"You really wanna spend our entire time here getting almost run over by people on bikes as you look at some boring algae?"

"Well… my research has not proven to yield many results, so I thought of perhaps looking into other potential supernatural phenomena in the direct area. Hold on, I wrote down a list." Ford grabbed his journal as he flipped through the pages.

"Here, well… lots of werewolf stories, stories about other monsters that look like wolves… more wolves…"

Stan laughed as he leaned back, throwing his feet up on the table. "Do they have anything other than wolves here?"

"Well, there are some… a group of female ghosts that have made themselves pretty infamous. Though, judging by their track record, I fear we may not have much luck studying them. There's also the report from a few years back about the flying jellyfish-spaceship? The issue for a lot of these would be that we would have to venture out of the city, but I'd rather avoid leaving the boat at night," Ford muttered as he worried his lip between his teeth.

"Why? The people don't seem **that** dangerous," Stan said, still only half-listening to his brother's ramblings.

"It's not the people I'm worried about… it's the canals."

"The canals? Sixer, I'm pretty sure we won't fall in; they're surrounded by a fence almost everywhere," Stan replied.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that; there are legends of a beast living in the water, pulling people in," Ford said, finally looking up from his journal.

Stan rolled his eyes. He got up and leaned against the table, mirroring his brother's pose. "Sounds like some classic tale to keep kids away from the water if you ask me,"

"Well, many of the cryptids we've encountered fall under that category. Even if it is simply an old wives' tale, I'd rather be safe than sorry," Ford countered.

"Whatever… I'm going out for some air. I'll be sure to stay clear of the water if it really scares you that much," Stan said as he walked towards the door. With a chuckle, he added, "I'll be sure to stay clear of the *scary* water."

"Just for a walk?" Ford questioned with a raised eyebrow.

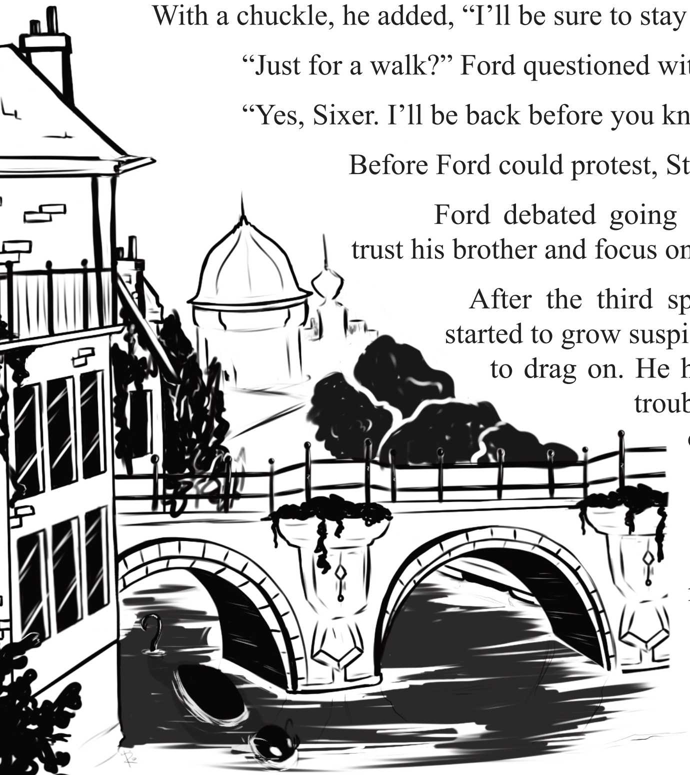
"Yes, Sixer. I'll be back before you know it."

Before Ford could protest, Stan had walked out and shut the door.

Ford debated going after him. Ultimately, he decided to trust his brother and focus on his research for now.

After the third species of algae was documented, he started to grow suspicious of how long Stan's walk seemed to drag on. He had no interest in his brother causing trouble in yet another city, so after a minute of debating with himself he went to look for him, grabbing his coat and venturing into the cool summer night.

As he walked down the road in search of places he suspected his brother to have gone, he walked over



an old bridge and looked down at the water. The sky was clear and he hoped to see the reflection of the stars, yet was greeted with merely the reflection of the street lights. Still, he stared at the surface for a few seconds, watching the small waves.

That's when he heard a voice.

Strange, he hadn't seen any other people around. They had docked away from the busy parts of the city, so it came as a surprise to hear someone at this hour. When he looked around he saw no one; however, the voice sounded close, just muffled, as if there was a wall between them. That's when he noticed that the voice sounded like his brother.

Ford began to look around more frantically in search of Stan, but there was no trace of him. Suddenly, he realized that the voice seemed to be coming from underneath the bridge. He got closer to the edge, trying to see if he was really hearing that right. As he leaned over the edge, he suddenly felt something grab his coat. With an inhuman force, it pulled him over the edge into the water.

He barely had time to process what was happening as he got a mouthful of canal. It took a few moments to pull him down towards the bottom, which was even deeper than he had originally thought.

He was even more surprised when he suddenly broke the surface of the water again and immediately fell over, landing in a big pile of seaweed that shielded him from sustaining any injuries. It still hurt and knocked the wind out of him; upon landing, Ford began coughing up all the water he had unintentionally swallowed.

After expelling what felt like an entire bucket of water from his lungs, he tried looking around, but it was too dark to make out anything—until he saw two blazing red eyes focused on him from about 20 feet up.

"Another one, huh?" a grumbling, thickly accented voice rumbled. "It seems to be my lucky day," it growled, and a soft blue pulse lighted over the creature's body. Ford could briefly see now that luckily the monster was in fact perched atop a large rock.

"I assume you two know each other?" It almost sounded… smug? Its eyes appeared to focus on something else, and Ford followed the creature's gaze over to a silhouette he could barely distinguish in the dark. The silhouette was looking at him too.

Ford was a smart enough man to not trust what he was seeing—it could very likely be a trap. However, the silhouette evidently didn't agree.

"What-what're you talking about, you beast?" Stan's voice echoed across the cavern. Of course his brother would have gotten himself into a situation like this.

"Stanley? What in God's name is going on?" Ford reached an arm out in the dark as he walked towards his brother.

"Now hold on a second," taunted the beast, as once again a light pulsed from its being. Ford noticed clusters of algae lighting up all around, finally providing enough light to clearly see.

Suddenly, Stan screamed as he was lifted off the ground by a hook located on the tail of the creature.

Now that Ford could properly see it, he instantly recognized it as the monster he had warned Stan about earlier.

Stan was thrashing in the air trying to free himself, but it was no use—he was carefully placed on a rock formation similar to the one the beast—that now Ford knew to be locally locally called the Bullebak—was sitting on.

"Ford, what is that thing?!" Stan yelled, now on eye level with it.

The Bullebak laughed. "Oh, so you two *do* know each other? That's gonna be extra fun." It extended its tail again towards the ceiling still shrouded in darkness, using it as a hook and lifting itself up.

As it disappeared into the darkness, a clear splatter was heard. Neither of the brothers had time to think about that as they turned to each other.

"Stanley, it's going to be okay. Trust me—we just need to get you down. Do you see anywhere you could—" Before he could finish his sentence, that same hooked tail reached down and lifted Stan upside-down again.

A roar erupted, and the faint glow of the algae and moss faded before a flash of light came from above. Finally, the ceiling of the cave became visible, and looking up at it made Ford's head spin.

Above him was a complete replica of the street he was walking on earlier, yet the houses were dilapidated and covered in the same kind of bioluminescent flora. There was even a canal, for he could see the surface of the water gently swaying. It was as if he was looking down instead of up.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

The Bullebak peeked out from the surface right above where Stan was still dangling. Instead of the red glow he had perceived earlier, its eyes were now the same hue of blue as the algae.

Stan was about to open his mouth when he looked into the Bullebak's eyes and suddenly went limp, just staring out in front of him into the city. Ford caught a glimpse of his brother's face and saw that his eyes were now glowing as well.

"Oh this is going to be good…" the Bullebak said in a low voice. "So much to work with here…"

"Let him go!" Ford yelled. He wished he had come a little more prepared; feeling around his coat pockets yielded nothing particularly useful for the current situation.

"Oh, shut up, you freak." The Bullebak turned to look at Ford and scoffed, "What? Surprised I noticed? It's not that hard. You don't hide it as well as you used to."

It took him a few seconds to figure out what it meant, but then Ford looked down at his hands, then back up at the Bullebak. "'As well as I used to'?"

"Well, you used to always put your hands behind your back or in your pockets, didn't you?" It turned its gaze upon Stan again. Ford realized it was likely able to read Stan's mind.

"I can also tell that you are still very bitter. I mean, this guy here ruined the entire course of your life, didn't he? Why should I let him go, then?"

Ford was taken aback for a few seconds. "That's not true."

"Is it not? Face the facts—"

Ford cut the Bullebak off before it could finish that sentence. "I won't fall for those cheap tricks. You know nothing about us." Ford attempted to puff out his chest, however, the weird angle at which he had to crane his neck made it just look very awkward.

"Well, in that case I'll just…" In a flash, the creature pulled its tail towards itself, dragging Stan up into the water.

Ford yelled out at the Bullebak to stop, but his words fell on deaf ears as it, too, vanished into the dark abyss of the water.

For the next minute, he switched between frantically looking around for something to save his brother, trying to climb up towards the water, and staring up at the ceiling to attempt to catch a glimpse of the Bullebak and his brother.

Then, suddenly, a roaring laughter erupted as both the creature and a still-hypnotized Stan re-emerged. "Oh, that was good; you really should have seen how stupid you looked."

"Did you really think I was done talking to you? If you don't want to believe he ruined your life then… let's talk about how you ruined his…" It pulled Stan up higher towards the water as it directly looked into his eyes.

"I don't think he ever told you the extent of what happened during all those years."

Ford felt like throwing up.

"How much he suffered… At least you were well into adulthood, he was just a kid."

He didn't respond. He had nothing to say as the Bullebak continued with its taunting.

"Face it, you don't deserve him. He—"

Without warning, a pained roar erupted, and the bioluminescent plants pulsed with light. Ford looked up to see that Stan somehow managed to become lucid again and punch the Bullebak right on the nose.

Ford saw him thrash and kick more violently until he got free from the hook, falling and landing in the thick layer of seaweed on the floor. He quickly rushed over to aid Stan while the Bullebak was still distracted.

"Stanley, are you okay?" Ford pulled his brother on to his feet as he protectively pulled him behind a rock with him.

"I'm fine," Stan coughed as he leaned against the rock formation. "What do we do now?"

Ford looked around, spotting a staircase carved into the rocks. It was thin and uneven, and towards the end it disappeared into darkness. He had no idea where it led, but it was their only chance.

"Stanley, we're gonna have to get to those stairs; when we reach the top, we'll see what to do."

They tried to sneak over, but just as they were about there, the Bullebak howled as its hooked tail reached out towards them again. They quickened their pace, and as they reached the stairs, Ford quickly ran up them.

"Ah fuck—shit—"

Ford turned around to see Stan clutching his ankle, having clearly slipped on the wet stone. Ford watched how the Bullebak quickly swam in their direction with its tail ready.

Before Ford could fully catch up with his own brain, he had already dashed back down, grabbed his brother, and held him up as they rushed up the rest of the stairs. He let Stan lean most of his weight on him—his ankle seemed to be in bad condition.

When they reached the top, he pushed Stan through the open passage and yelled out to the creature one last time. "He actually only ever saved my life!" He immediately followed into the cave after his brother, barely ducking out of the way of another swing of the Bullebak's tail.

Ford carried Stan further down until they reached a room with a door where the faint light of the streets penetrated the darkness. They both heaved as they leaned against the wall.

"Thanks for saving me," Stan hissed as he tried to fully support his own weight.

"I only did the logical thing, Stanley," Ford assured him as he walked over to the door and began trying to pick the lock.

"It's not true what he said about you, y'know… you didn't ruin my life," Stan muttered. Ford immediately turned to face him.

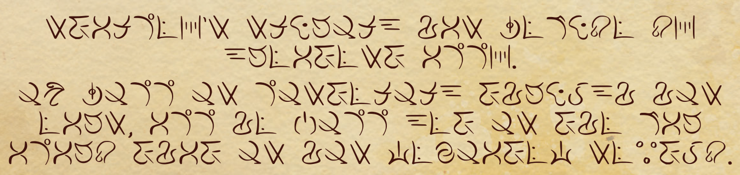
"Stanley, I—" But Stan cut him off.

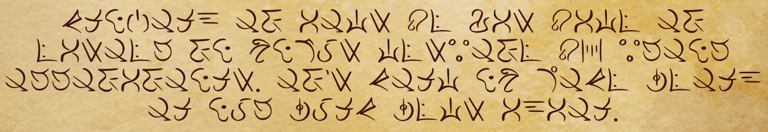
"That's why I punched him; just thought you should know." Then, after a brief pause, he added, "Also, you're picking the lock wrong." He stumbled over clumsily and began fidgeting with the lock himself. After about thirty seconds, he pushed the rusty door open.

They found themselves at the edge of the canal under a bridge a bit further off from where they had both been pulled down. Ford didn't know what to say as they both awkwardly maneuvered back onto the street. Ford helped Stan walk since he was still unable to fully use his foot, and he didn't let go of him as they headed back towards the boat.

"You never ruined mine, either."

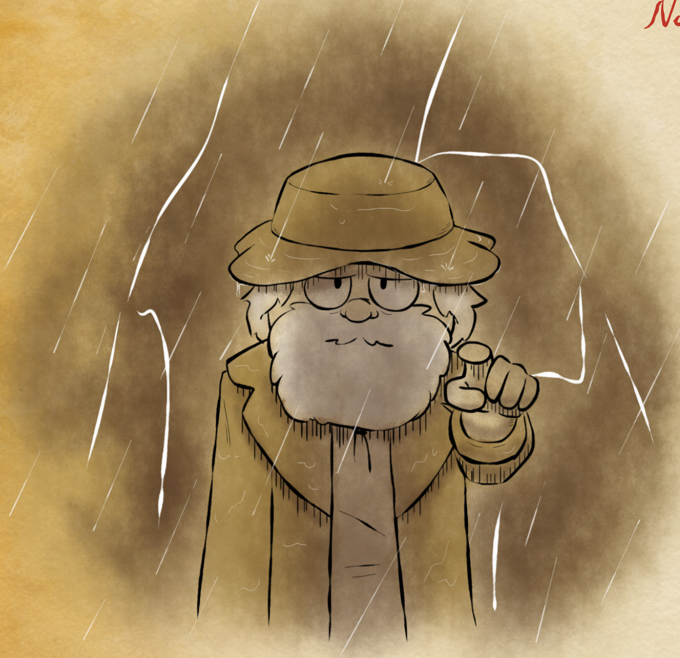
It's 5am in Belgium, the perfect time of day. No matter the timezone, it is best to work when your mind is refreshed and before anyone else is awake enough to impede.





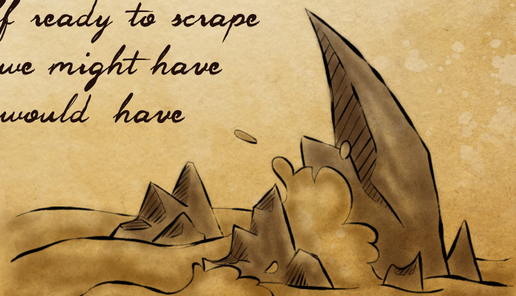
The Klabautermann

The Klabautermann is a sea guardian who protects ships during sailing, if German folklore is to be believed; rather short and unexpectedly normal-looking for a mystical being. Their sailor clothes and an old seabag are reminiscent of a time far before my own. Only hearing them is considered a blessing; however, seeing them means imminent doom. Makes you wonder how they turn invisible? How do they choose a ship worthy of guarding?



Not much of a talker . . .

Stanley and I came face to face with them during a rather bad storm on our travels. It started with weird noises coming from below deck at night, which caused Stanley to complain rather loudly. I noticed soon after that our storage seemed off—almost like it was better optimized to accommodate for the roughening sea around us. We finally got a glimpse of them when we barely kept the ship upright and our equipment secured. They were just staring at us and pointing to what we later discovered was a rather dangerous riff ready to scrape our starboard. Without the warning, we might have ended our journey faster than we would have anticipated.



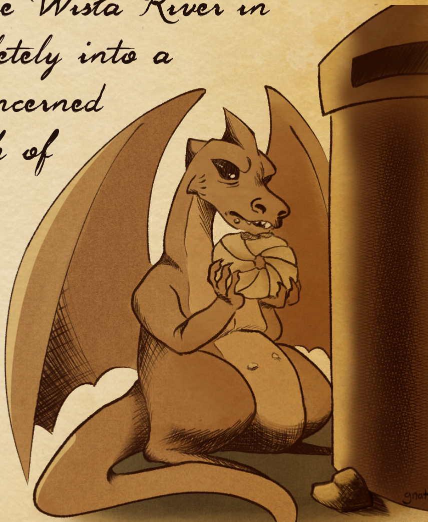
Once the storm was mostly over and we found a safe place to drop our anchor, the Klabautermann didn't seem to be in a rush to leave. We didn't mind the company necessarily, so we spent the following evenings playing card games while the rain kept falling. Who would have guessed that guardian spirits like to play poker? Stanley did threaten violence if another night disturbance were to occur. However, though I heard Stanley more than once banging his foot on the floor and complaining when the sounds of hammering and shuffling of our supplies came from the storage room, he never followed through with his threats.

I know they cheated. They must have!

You are just upset you lost while cheating.

Wawel Dragon

The next stop on our journey was right by the Wista River in Kraków. The Wawel Castle was converted completely into a tourist spot now, so the strong anomalous signals concerned me greatly. Tourists going missing is far too much of an international headache to risk.



It took a day of searching (or, as Stanley called it, sightseeing) to find our target: the Wawel Dragon. It looked just like the legends except... smaller? At the size of a dog, most people did not perceive it as it ate through any nearby trash bin. Perhaps this was a mercy; if it was the size it was supposed to be, half the city would already be in its cavernous belly.

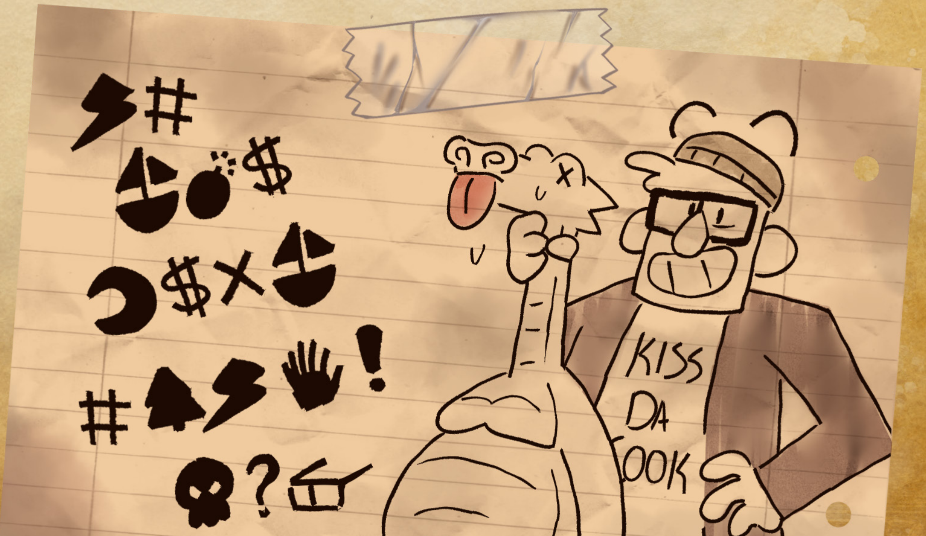
The question surfaced: why was the dragon here? Was it a souvenir that's come to life? An egg that took centuries to hatch?

I observed it from a distance and learned nothing other than (besides trash) it loved eating kiełbasa, obwarzanki, and any city pigeon that had the misfortune of getting into its grasp. That's not the gołabki the locals usually enjoy, but it seemed to devour them happily anyway.

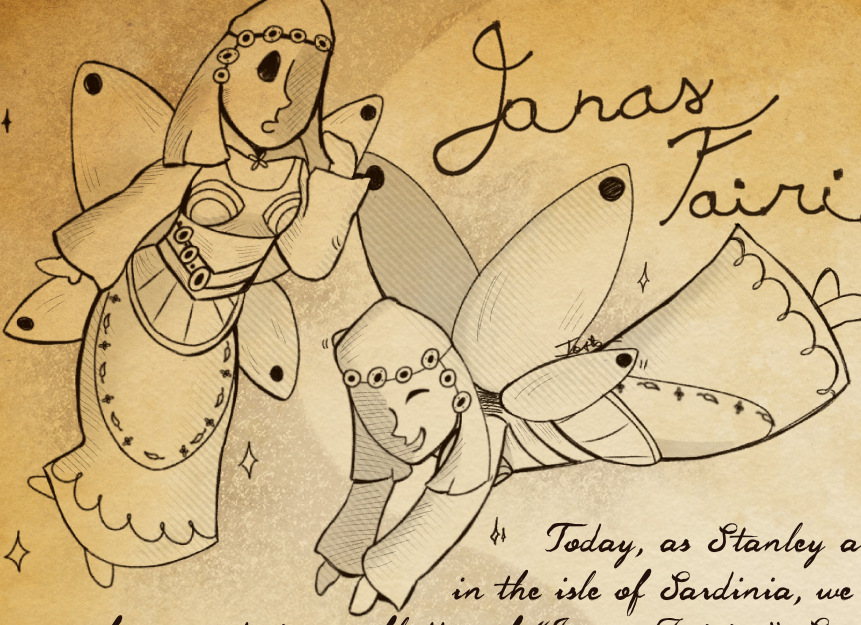
Capturing the creature was a challenge. It evaded traditional means of capture, and ate through the traps we laid for it! Did this thing have a black hole for a stomach?! I turned to the legends for guidance on conquering the beast before it grew too large. While details differ, the skeleton is the same: the hungry dragon, terrorizing the community, is tricked into eating a spice ridden decoy. Struck by thirst, it drinks until it bursts and frees everyone of its terror.

Stanley volunteered to cook up the decoy. Named the "40 spice surprise," it consisted mostly of any spicy pepper he could get his hands on. Instead of a sheep skin, Stanley wrapped it in an old torn jacket of mine. I was worried the creature was feeding itself too well for this to work, but it worked like a charm! The glutton gobbled it up and then ran like a bat out of hell directly into the river. Instead of drinking itself to death, the dragon fell right in; all the trash in its belly sank like a rock to the bottom. Stanley and I extracted it out of the water with our combined fishing prowess.

No hint to its origins yet, but it does store well.



Janas Fairies

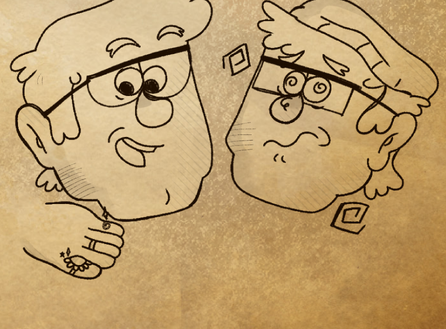


Today, as Stanley and I set to shore in the isle of Sardinia, we had the pleasure of encountering a flutter of "Janas Fairies." Small, winged fairy creatures... their clothes seem to resemble traditional attire from this place.

They live in isolated spots of the forest. We stumbled upon their dens, barely ever noticing they were not just usual rocks! Carved on were tiny windows that emitted light from the inside, which allowed us to discover their hideouts.

They were... strangely welcoming. I was thrilled when they didn't turn down my attempt at conversation. Despite their apparent innocence, these fairies too turned out to be mischievous—at least, toward the ungrateful! While I managed to leave the spot with jewels and crystals donated by the Janas themselves, I cannot say the same for Stanley. His disinterest must have upset the fairies.

He still is lightheaded and dizzy as I'm writing this.



Mavka

A half day's travel into western Ukraine, Stanley and I found ourselves in a forest. A woman found us in turn.

I first spotted her at a stream bank surrounded by trees, dressed in traditional Ukrainian clothing bearing the fine embroidery of **VYSHYVANKA**, the red thread of which caught my eye against the endless green of the forest.

One could've thought her to be a normal woman from our destination village, and yet my continued survival depends on being suspicious of out-of-place people...especially those with indeterminable shadows. If her soundless appearance didn't foretell her cryptic status, her hair did; it hung like the branches of a willow tree from her head in an equal shade of green.

Witches are not rare, nor are they difficult to distinguish once seen, yet the variety of temperament is vast and rules for engagement are often unknown until broken with consequence.

As I was figuring out how to address her, I failed to consider how Stanley is cut off from basic survival instincts in the face of beautiful women.

He introduced himself to her with his **FULL GOVERNMENT NAME** and a **BOW**.

...That turned out to be the correct answer to the riddle of a witch's company. She laughed. (I believe the fondness for stooge dynamics in Ukrainian humor played a part.)

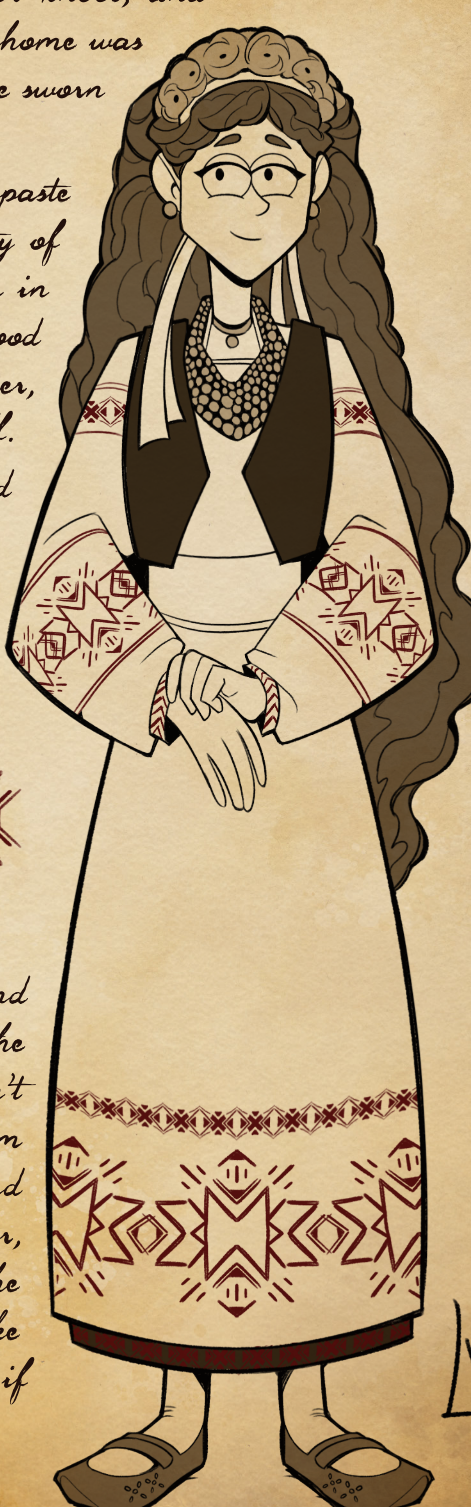
She introduced herself as Mavka, and we were in her forest.

Despite my better judgement, I found I could no longer fear her—and I felt where fear should have been, yet was not.

Mavka told us we wouldn't make it to the village before it became cold, and was amused enough to invite us to shelter in her home until morning. It was impossibly verdant, bundles of herbs hung everywhere, including door knobs, and plants grew in all corners—her home was so brimming with life I could've sworn the house was breathing.

She fed us borscht, liver paste on black bread, a LARGE variety of pickled foods, and tea with jam in it. Stanley was a surprisingly good conversationalist through dinner, and she opened up about herself.

Mavka is a healer and a guardian. Her god children live in the village, so she is very particular about strangers.



She makes medicine and spells, reads futures, changes the direction of the wind so it doesn't sicken cattle, protects crops from frost, wards against hunger and hungry spirits in the winter, and always blesses children. She is shockingly humble and spoke about regular farm work as if

Gray Vamp

it was just as magical as stopping a stream and physically beating the dark.

She is also very good at tormenting tricksters.

I asked her if she knew Bill Cipher. She met him once and tied him to a tree until her chickens plucked out his eye once for every egg.

Then I asked how she knew my name when, unlike my brother, I hadn't said it.

"I know every pine in my forest. You are no exception, Ford," she said.

Mavka is a very powerful witch. We are lucky she is so benevolent.

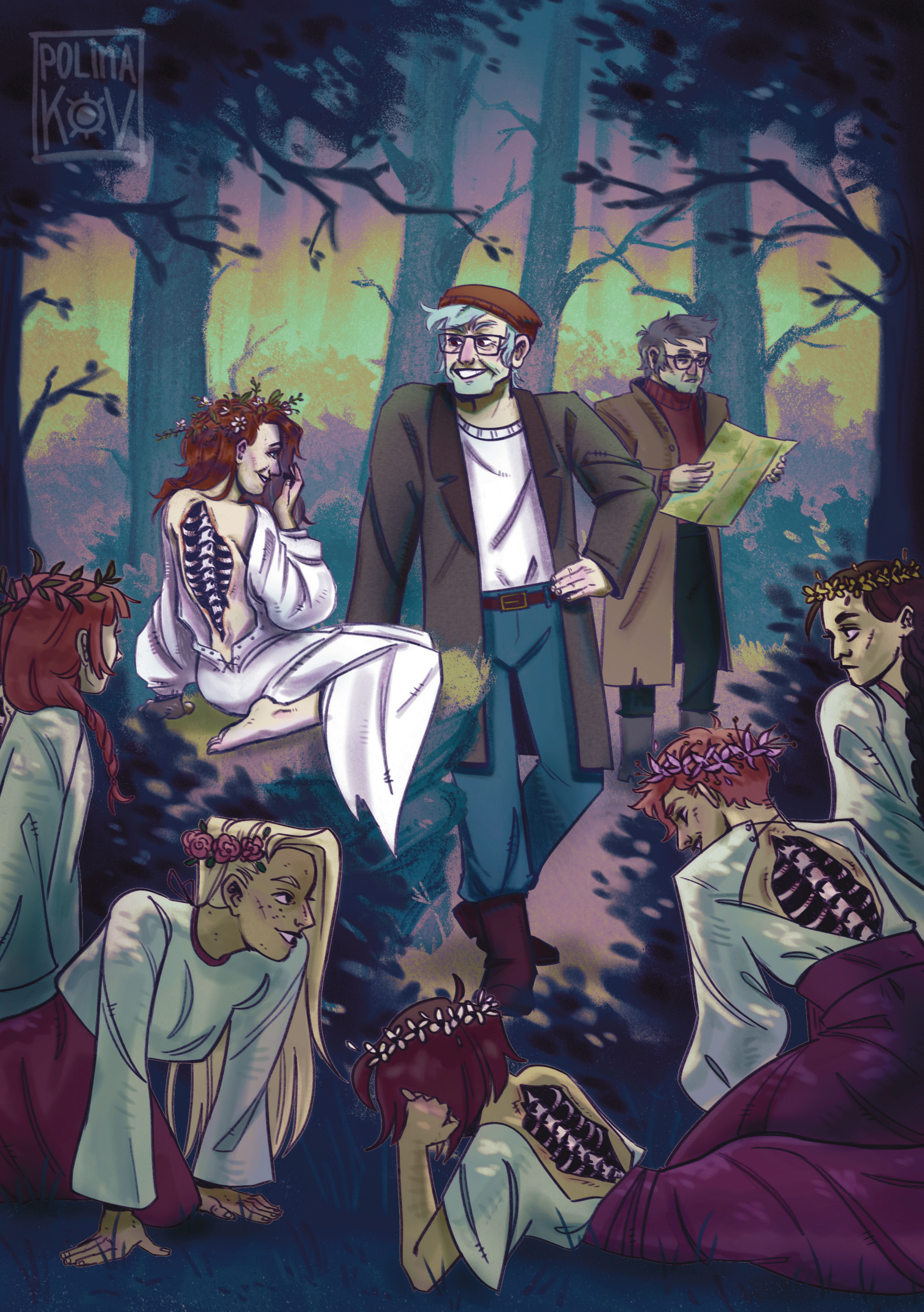
With that in mind, this is the part of what she said that night that I can't understand, as it shouldn't have gotten lost in translation with the rosetta stone:

"I have many sisters. Some Nyavka. Watch their backs around yourselves. The empty are unkind."

Watch THEIR backs? Perhaps the stone doesn't work well with some turns of phrase.

I found a satchel in my bag the morning after we left... It's labelled Nyavka.

I don't know why I'm not compelled to open it.


POLINA
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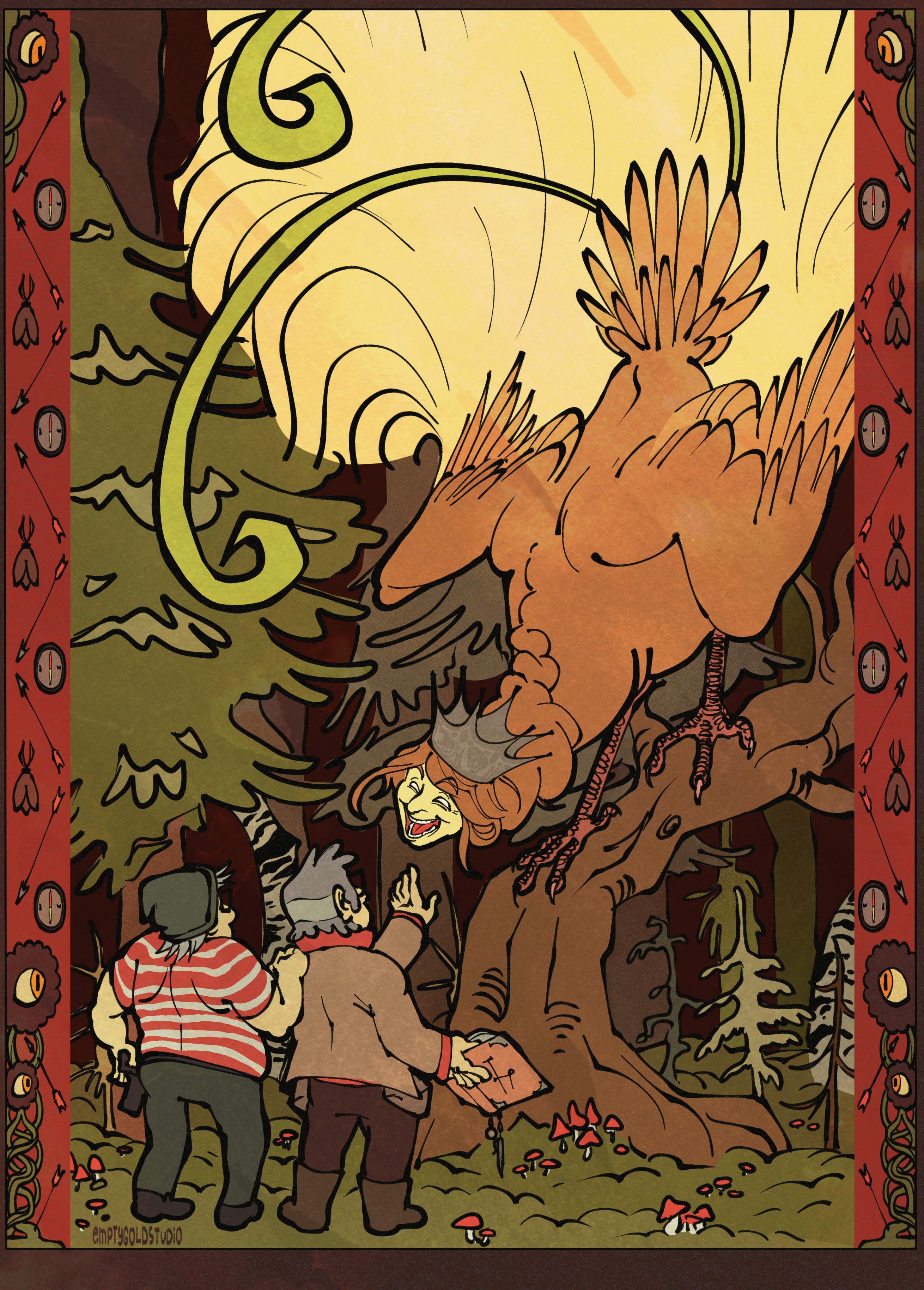
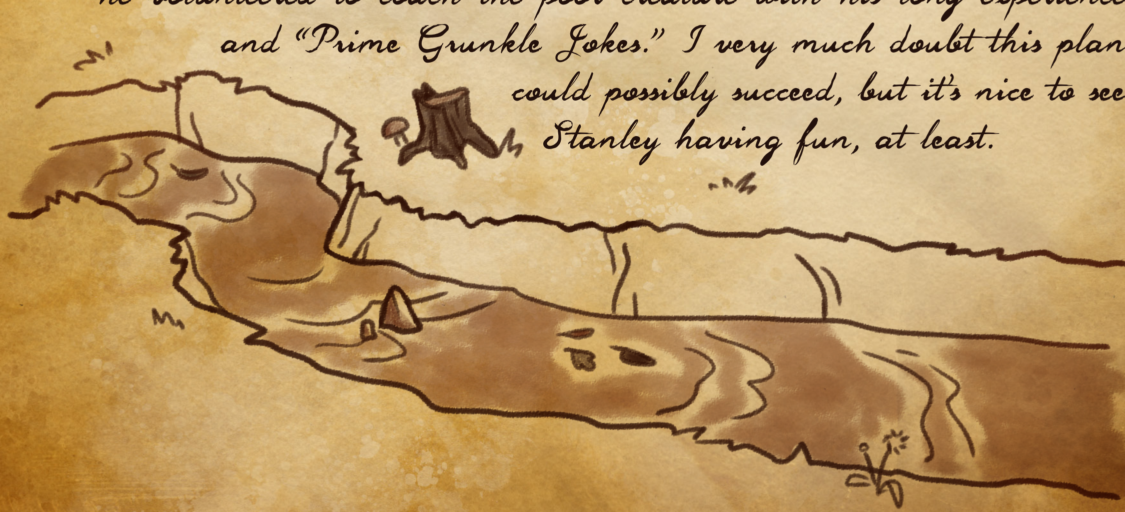

emptygoldstudio

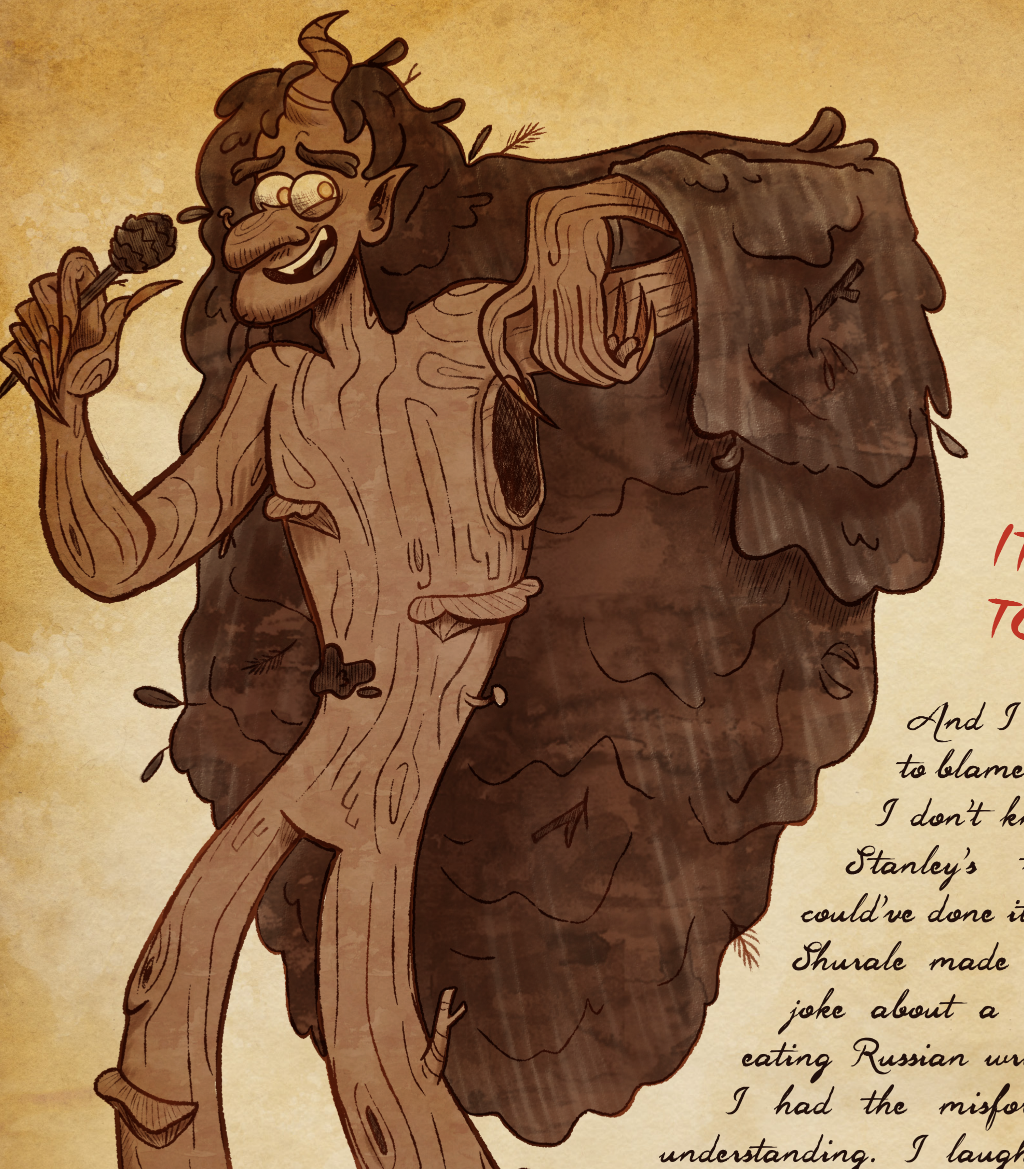
SHURALE

Shurale is known as a tall tree-like humanoid forest spirit—mistakenly so, as it has neither power over the woods nor any authority within it. It only resides there. While it can take the form of a tree, it is easily recognizable by its glowing eyes, a horn on its forehead, inverted feet, long bushy hair, and equally long copper fingernails. If you get closer, you may also notice large holes under its armpits that lead straight to the creature's insides, which I find incredibly impractical from an evolutionary point of view, even more so than the inverted feet.

Apparently, Shurales were more of a nuisance in the days of old, as they are mostly known for tiring out domesticated horses by riding them in the night while sitting backwards. These days, though, they seem to only pester people with their jokes. The Shurale Stanley and I encountered explained that he would proceed to tickle us to death if we laughed, but the fact that he had to explain it should be telling: the jokes were really not that good. Frankly, I found them terrible—not a single piece of intellectual humor! Even Stanley agreed with me on that.

I don't know if all other Shurales have a sense of humor as bad as this one, but if they do, they might be out of their bread and butter. Stanley claimed the situation to be so sad, in fact, that he volunteered to coach the poor creature with his long experience and "Prime Grunkle Jokes." I very much doubt this plan could possibly succeed, but it's nice to see Stanley having fun, at least.





IT WORKED TOO WELL!

And I might be to blame for that. I don't know how Stanley's teachings could've done it, but the Shurale made a clever joke about a cannibal eating Russian writers that I had the misfortune of understanding. I laughed, and we had to run. Surprisingly, despite the backwards feet, Shurales are very fast runners! However, when we jumped over a river, the creature stopped his chase, yelling at us and asking where the mouth of the river was. I directed him southwards. He will surely forget about us on his run to the Caspian Sea.

CONCLUSION:
Shurales hate water. They are also not very intelligent.

Memory Log 2

Author: Tinglecannon

Trigger warnings: *swearing*

Yeah, yeah. It's been weeks since I last wrote in here.

I'm just...not gettin' good info yet. I keep asking *EVERYTHING* we run into that can talk. Or is just, smart seeming, like those magpies. Kinda stupid to ask birds for life or death info tho, huh?

...

I'll be back sooner next time.

Still nothing... Just more things trying to attack us. And I'm gettin' real freakin' tired of giant worms and dragons and whatever wanting to eat us.

I did see—in your new fancy code that was no brainer to crack by the *way*—you mention that Xolotl guy, and I've heard a few cryptids mention them too. It's a start at least. Just sucks that's back in Mexico and we're way past there now.

WE'LL MEET AGAIN

DON'T KNOW WHERE DON'T
KNOW WHEN

BUT I KNOW WE'LL MEET AGAIN

SOME SUNNY DAY

HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA
HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH

Well, THAT's ^ fucking concerning.

Sure helps I haven't been gettin' any fuckin' help from these duds we've run into. That damn Weird Al tree was even more useless than that cheating sailor gnome guy was!

My eyes burned like crazy all day, and Ford looked fuckin' *terrified* of me. He's getting more skittish each day! The codes are getting more frantic it's...

Dammit.

Mabel put a sheet of glow in the dark stars in every journal she could find the last time we visited. Dipper wrote on the back telling me I should use these to make a path for the bathroom at night. I should be offended but it's an idea worth taking.

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BACKWARD FEET
Marii Beann

It's Always the Crossbows You Never Expect!

Author: Spot | *Spots:* anaquariusfox

Beta reader: Dee

Content warnings: *animal death, light descriptions of gore*

The Peris—mysterious guardians of the Hindu Kush mountains—were said to reside in their own hidden realm somewhere within the rural parts of Halan, Jammu and Kashmir.

Ford had, of course, insisted on visiting.

And when they encountered a shepherd who offered them a place to stay along their walk through the mountains, Ford didn't let the chance slip.

Stan was just thankful they had found a place to sleep for the night, even if it meant sleeping on the floor. He peacefully went to bed that night, relaxing his aching limbs after a day of walking.

"Come, Stanley!" Ford said, shaking him awake with a nearly manic grin. "We must make haste. The night only lasts for so long!"

Stan blinked blearily, trying to catch up. "...What're we hurryin' for?"

"Didn't I tell you earlier? The Peris, of course."

Before he could answer, Ford was already throwing him a jacket. Groaning, Stanley got up, slowly dressing as his brother moved around the room, bouncing on his feet.

When he turned, Ford was halfway out of the window, slipping through before Stan could call out to him. His hand reached inside momentarily to drag out—*was that a crossbow?*

With a muttered curse, Stan followed.

He winced at the feeling of the uneven ground under his boots, eyeing the crossbow slung across Ford's shoulder warily as he walked behind him. He didn't have the best memories of it, after all.

Stan knew letting himself be dragged out to the mountains in the middle of the night was a mistake.

What he will realize *much* later was that his second mistake was not carrying that damned crossbow himself.

* * *

Stan huffed, jerking his leg up at a painful angle as he stepped on a rock. He could see Ford's faint figure moving ahead of him in the dark, brimming with energy.

"Ford," he called out, pressing a hand to his aching lower back. "If you want me alive, you gotta let me sleep sometime."

"And miss out on documenting the nocturnal behaviour of the Peris firsthand? Just imagine, Stanley." Ford looked back at him, glasses glinting in the moonlight. "It's never been recorded before!"

Stan sighed, rushing to catch up. "Next time, maybe wait for the sun, eh?" Then much quieter, he added, "I can feel myself passin' away over here."

The grass around him began to taper down. They had reached a clearing of trees, and in the dead of the night, the branches loomed towards him, looking straight out of those creepy films they would watch together as kids. He shuffled away from them, a chill creeping down his spine.

Just then, he slammed into something, stumbling. For a lingering second, he thought he had kicked Waddles by accident—as he was prone to do in the late hours—so he reached out to apologize and comfort him in the dark. However, when he touched it, instead of feeling bristly skin, there was warm fuzz sinking under his fingers.

Ford's laugh ahead of him caught his attention, making him quickly withdraw his hand as the animal walked away.

He stepped forward with a wide stride, finding his twin kneeling to pet a sheep. The animal, docile in his hands, was preening at the attention. "I didn't expect to find the flock alone out here," he said. "And so late, no less!"

Stan smiled despite himself, taking another chance to run his hand through the scratchy wool. "Ya know, they *are* pretty cute."

"Oh, that reminds me…" Ford started, letting the sheep in front of him wander away, hefting the crossbow off his shoulder. "You remember the Jinn we found last week?"

Stan shuddered at the memory. "Ugh, don't even mention it."

Ford grinned at the memory and tried to stifle it when he saw Stan's sour face.

He failed.

"Yes, well, that brings me back to my point. The Peris are… somewhat like that, supernatural beings—"

A sharp crack cut him off.

Stan's blood ran cold.

Then, the sound of a click followed by a bowstring.

He had leapt forward knocking his brother behind him, balling his hands into fists instinctively, but it was too late.

Before he could react, something heavy hit the ground, followed by complete silence.

It took a few seconds for Stan to start fumbling for his flashlight, the beam illuminating the dead body of a sheep. Ford's arrow sat neatly between its eyes, and as realization hit them both, Ford's breath hitched.

Stan stared, mouth hanging open. "You've gotta be kiddin' me."

Ford clutched the crossbow closer with a slight tremble to his hands. With the way they lived, he *knew* it could have been anything—anyone—ready to kill them, he knew it was safer to shoot than to wait. It didn't ease the uncomfortable twist in his stomach. "I—I didn't think—maybe it's not *dead*."

Ford looked at him expectantly; after rolling his eyes, Stan gently ran his hand under its nose, already knowing the answer.

"Dead," he said. "Obviously." Stan turned around, looking into his brother's guilty eyes. "You shot a sheep, Ford."

"I didn't *mean to*. I thought—we both heard the noise," Ford tried to defend himself, alibi weak even to his own ears. "Instinct took over, I—"

"You always do this!" Stan snapped, frustrated, getting to his feet faster than he should've. "You're too trigger-happy, damn it; what if it's the shepherd's kid next time, huh? We're guests here, and you just killed the livestock of the guy we're leeching from!"

Ford opened his mouth a few times, eyes round with growing guilt, but no words came out. It was a look Stan had been getting too acquainted with lately, especially when it came to recovering his memories.

Stan forced himself to take a deep breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Alright. New plan." He looked around, relieved when he didn't see any witnesses. The rest of the herd seemed unfazed, or they didn't care.

Stan was glad they couldn't talk.

He turned to his brother again. The sheep that had taken a liking to him wandered over once more, bumping its head softly against his knee in search of affection, and he tried not to grimace. "There's nothing more we can do 'bout it. Let's just bury it and play dumb."

Ford nodded hesitantly, patting the head of the animal before gently pushing it away. He trailed a hand down its soft back, apologetic. "Of course. That makes sense."

"Hope there ain't a dog out here."

"There shouldn't be," Ford said, too quickly. He always relied on facts to relax, and now was no different. "If there was, it'd be tied up outside the house. Muslims consider dogs impure."

Stan nodded, ending the discussion.

Together, they found a soft patch of earth and began to dig a shallow grave with their bare hands. Stan rolled the body in, and that was that.

Ford patted the loose patches down, wiping the dirt from his hands before hesitantly approaching Stan, voice thin. “I’m sorry, Stanley. I shouldn’t have brought us here.”

“You’re damn right,” Stan said before glancing his way, seeing the way his frown pulled at the edges of his face.

He felt the slightest bit of guilt, groaning and pulling him into a sideways hug. “Let’s just get back before anyone notices we’re gone.”

Ford nodded, and Stan led the way back in silence.

This time, the crossbow was slung over *his* shoulder.

Neither saw the creature hiding amongst the shadows of the trees, or how it flitted away just as quickly, smooth as smoke.

As soon as they got back, Stan was out like a light. Ford wasn’t so lucky.

Throughout his time in the multiverse, he had trained himself to sleep anywhere, similar to a soldier on the battlefield.

But not this time.

He could blame bad habits, the rough material of his trousers, even nerves. But the truth was simpler than that. The image of the dead sheep wouldn’t go away, no matter how much he tried.

He’d killed before—many times, in fact—but this was different. Pointless. That animal hadn’t been a threat, just curious.

Any excitement he’d had about finding the elusive Peris was dampened.

He drummed his fingers on the cover of his journal in the darkness, itching to record his thoughts. As he stared at the ceiling, he thought of the flock’s trust, the kindness of their host… He had opened his home, given them food, and he had repaid it with blood on his land.

Ford knew he only had his own reckless hands to blame.

He told himself he would pay for it if he could, hands itching to make it right somehow, but the admission would only make it worse. They were the only foreigners in the village, after all. If the body were found, the blame would fall on them. He didn’t want Stanley to pay for his mistakes again.

He squeezed his eyes shut, willing himself to drift off to sleep, but just then, a strange light made him open his eyes.

He saw the most brilliant glimmer in front of him, a mix of colors—even fordtramarine—illuminating the whole room.

And that’s when a body appeared in front of him.

Ford gasped, reaching around aimlessly for a weapon.

He tried to scream Stan’s name before a clump of something wet and raw was forced into the back of his throat, choking him into silence.

Ford struck back then, unable to land a hit, struggling as he was bound.

The growl died in his throat as, to his abject horror, he was blindfolded.

Soon after, he could feel his body rising in the air, weightless without the firm press of the ground beneath him.

He was dragged towards the window, writhing out of the blankets.

Ford couldn't spit out the clump in his mouth before he was yanked out, limbs bound and eyes covered.

He threw his head forward in a last-ditch effort to break free, only succeeding in slamming his head against the edge of the windowsill, making the blindfold move enough to throw one last look towards the room.

The last thing he saw before passing out was Stanley sleeping peacefully.

* * *

When Stan woke up, surprisingly well-rested, the sun was streaming through the open window, blinding him momentarily.

He squinted his eyes, confused at the sight.

Ford always insisted on keeping the windows shut, as the breeze on his face would often wake him.

He pushed himself to his feet, but as he put his glasses on, he saw the dirt caked under his nails. Last night came to him in disturbing clarity. He turned away from the memory, choosing to focus on finding out why Ford wasn't here.

Just then, he realized the blankets and sheets were tossed around, a strange occurrence because Ford was *meticulous*—especially when it came to other people's houses. In fact, he was usually the one scolding Stan for leaving their room a mess; so he ducked his head out into the hallway and saw the youngest son walking into the kitchen.

He called out to him, "*Eh, Apne mera bhai ko dekha hai?* (Hey, have you seen my brother?)"

"*Nahi. Kal se nahi.* (No. Not since yesterday.)"

Stan looked back, an uneasy feeling in his gut. If the people within the house hadn't seen him, where could he be?

The messy sheets, the crossbow still discarded beneath the windowsill, and the most damning evidence of all: Ford's gun tangled in the sheets.

His stomach dropped as he realized Ford hadn't left of his own accord. Panicked, he ran out of the room.

In the hallway, he found the shepherd's young daughter, who wrapped her shawl tighter and tried to turn away when she saw him. "*Rook* (Stop!)" He paused, trying to be polite, tamping down his fear. "*Rookjayye* (Stop, please.)"

She looked at him quickly, confused. He barreled on with the limited Hindi he knew. "*Mera, bhai. Chor, ho gaye?* (My brother, stole, he was?)" He snapped his fingers, the word coming to him. "*Ghayab!* (Gone!)"

Her eyes widened. "*Kya?* (What?)"

Stan knew that as much as he didn't want to admit it, he had to tell the truth for once if he wanted to find Ford. "*Kal, hum ne…* accidentally… *maray de?* Sheep. (Yesterday, we…accidentally… killed? Sheep.)"

Some of the words were beyond him, but he hoped he could convey at least the main idea. Her eyebrows pinched immediately. He tried again.

"*Kuch be karley gaye. Help karo!* (We'll do anything. Help us!)"

She looked around carefully and, upon seeing nobody around her, beckoned to him.

He followed her to the back part of the house, where she opened one of the doors and held up her hand, stopping him. He kept his distance, and she came back a few minutes later, holding a red box covered in an inlaid pattern of gold. In her other hand, she carried a handful of sticks.

She began to talk softly. "*Jo apka bhai ne laya hai, unko bol they hai Peris.* (Those who took your brother are known as Peris.)"

The only word that really registered to him was "*Peris*", the name familiar from their search last night.

She continued. "*Ah they hai jab ek bunda ke bhair chor ho ja they hai. Par key Sarparest hai. Isley hai humara pass kutte nahi hai. Ugar wapus chaiyahai, supsay ucha chooti meh ja char balaoy nam. Humse chopakur reh they hai.* (They come when a man's sheep is stolen. They are the guardians of the mountain. It's why we don't have dogs. Go to the highest point of the mountain and call out. They live hidden from us.)"

Stan was completely lost. At his confused face, she sighed. "Go, high…" She mimed a point with her hands. "Par." She pointed at the window.

"Mountain?" he added helpfully.

She nodded and continued. "Shout. It is hide away. Give." She passed him the items that she had gathered. "Mitai," at the box, and "Bakhur," at the incense.

He mumbled some faint acceptances, and then he was out the door in a flash, grabbing the crossbow that had started this whole disaster.

He couldn't help but feel dread at the sight of the mountains.

Although the vegetation was abundant and flat, he knew it would get worse the higher he traveled. His fear for his brother's life made his limbs faster, helping him endure the very human part of him that wanted to sit down and rest. Stan could only hope he didn't fall and gash his head open on the rocky terrain.

After who knows how long, he finally made it to a craggy peak. It was barren and lifeless, covered in stony rocks and thin trees.

It was a stark contrast to the area around it. *How could fairies live here?*

This was hardly a paradise, if he was being honest.

He opened his mouth and swallowed roughly, contemplating his next words. There was a tightness in the atmosphere that was definitely supernatural, making the words stick to the back of his throat. There was a subtle shake to his hands when he whispered, "*Um, mera bhai ka liya ay houn.* (Um, I've come for my brother.)"

He shook the box in his hands. "*Mitai lai houn.* (I brought mitai.)"

Just when he thought he had to change tactics, the space ahead of him seemed to distort before his very eyes, settling to reveal a warped mirage—a portal.

A warmth washed over him as he crossed through. On the other side, he stepped out into sunlight that didn't exist before, warming his wind-chilled cheeks.

Inside was an earthly, storybook kind of beauty, with trees blooming ahead of season and crystal-clear lakes of water, flanked by bushels of unfamiliar flowers. The sight overwhelmed him momentarily as his eyes roved over everything, struggling to comprehend it.

The setting was quite open, but when he squinted across the flat terrain, he could see some kind of box sticking out of the earth. He adjusted his glasses and leaped over the bunches of grass in front of him, using them as his only landmark.

As he got closer, he perked up at the sight of Ford seated on a patch of grass in a cage, bars wide enough to escape through. However, he was surrounded on all sides by a gaggle of the Peris, blocking any chance of escape, so Stan quietly crouched behind a thick bush of roses, peering through the leaves, biding his time.

It didn't take him long to realize that the Peris that circled Ford's cage were *giggling*, taking turns to pose for him as he sketched them in his journal. They were leaning into the bars, some teasing him with little flutters of their wings when it was their turn. A few even reached inside the cage, prodding at his shoulders and poking at his clothes. To Stan's horror, he didn't seem fazed in the least, allowing them to nudge at him while throwing flattery their way.

Stan gritted his teeth, pulse quick. *What the hell are you doing, Sixer?*

He didn't seem scared or stressed, or even like he *wanted* to escape. Ford looked thankful.

A model prisoner.

Anger quickly replaced the previous worry Stan had been drowning in. Leave it to Ford to make friends with the very same creatures that had kidnapped him. "Sixer," he shouted, springing to his feet, giving away his advantage. "I've been worried sick!"

Ford's head snapped, looking his way with a smile. "Stanley! I found the Peris! They're remarkable!"

Stan gawked at him, eyes going from the cage to his face.

He realized the rest of the Peris were now staring at him, and before he could move, one of them appeared before him with an irritated look that wasn't there before.

Though smaller than him, her presence was imposing enough to make him

AAF

step back. Black hair framed her features, her jewelry catching the light, glinting against the intricate fabric. It was clear she was the one in charge.

Stan thrust the offerings forward, a buffer between them, and she snatched them from him, turning away to open the box. Her face hardly changed when she saw what was within, and she tucked it under her arm, taking the incense from him as well.

Her eyebrows pinched together. “You’ve committed a sin,” she began, her words slow and heavily accented.“You think this makes up for it?”

“R-Right, so,” Stan began, folding his hands together as he fidgeted. Just when he was starting to gather his thoughts to make a passable apology, he was silenced by a squeezing sensation in his skull. He groaned and snapped his mouth shut, the pressure keeping him struggling. She didn’t want him to speak.

Her gaze left him, now directing the severe look Ford’s way. He had closed his journal, alarmed. He knew that whatever had shut his brother up was not normal.

The group that had gathered around him had melted away, nowhere to be seen. “And what say you, Sheep-Killer?”

In the moments it took him to reply, he could see how the pressure was getting much worse, depriving Stan of oxygen until he clutched at his throat, choking, and made a horrible wheezing sound.

Ford rose to his feet, watching as Stan struggled for air, panic filling his body. He forced himself to breathe evenly, pressing a trembling hand to his chest. “I—I’m truly, *sincerely* sorry. I never meant to harm your flock. My fear, my carelessness—they blinded me, and an innocent animal paid for it, but *please*,” he tried to reason, voice steadying with each word, eyes never leaving Stan.

“My brother bears no blame. I intend to make up for this any way I can. If it’s penance that you seek, take it from me, but release him. Please.”

“Ford—don’t you *dare*—” Stan wheezed, nearly buckling over. Hadn’t they gotten over this self-sacrificing cycle months ago? He would figure it out, even if his mind was all a jumble, the lack of oxygen starting to get to him.

The Peris’s stare snapped back at him and the pressure spiked, black spots pinching at the corners of his eyes.

Ford lunged forward, restricted by the suddenly-tighter bars of his cage, urgent now. “Enough! He’ll suffocate to death! I’m *sorry!*” He could feel his frightened heartbeat in his own ears; he was sure Stan would hit the ground soon, unconscious.

Silence fell, and after a moment, the air lightened and the rumbling of the weeds dissolved around him, easing their way into the ground as the bars of the cage seemed to relax. He didn’t wait for them to fully settle before he bolted Stanley’s way.

He bent down, hooking an arm under Stan’s shoulders as he helped steady him, still swaying, uncertain and breathless.

“Easy, Stanley. Just breathe, I’ve got you.”

She tilted her head at him, expectantly, and Ford scrambled to pull the crossbow off of Stan's back, offering it to her one-handed. With a flick of her finger, the weapon split apart right in his grasp, splintering into dozens of twigs before they hit the ground. Even the metal was bent into a crumpled heap.

The arrow materialized in her hand, and she lifted it threateningly, tapping it roughly against Ford's forehead. "Finished. Next time I see it, this goes here."

Ford nodded vigorously, and she sighed, tucking it into her sleeve. She jerked her head at a space behind him. The mirage-like portal had suddenly reappeared, and Ford all but shoved Stan through it, the tinkle of faint laughter following them.

"*Thavajay se jaa na.* (Go carefully)." Her voice echoed through the portal as it closed, though she was nowhere to be seen. Stan, still regaining his breath, could only think one thing: these Peris were really something to be respected.

It was no wonder the locals entrusted their sheep to them.

Ford had grabbed his sleeve and broke into a run, putting as much distance between them and the land of the Peris as they could, until Stan ground them to a halt wrenching himself free. "What've I told you about self-sacrificing, huh? We *both* agreed to stop doing that!"

"I'm sorry, Stanley. It seemed like the only way I could get you out alive," Ford apologized for what felt like the hundredth time in two days.

"Well, knock it off! I'm not losing you because of a sheep." He slung an arm over his brother's shoulders, steadying himself as they walked downhill. It felt like years had been taken off his lifespan. "Whatever. We made it out, so no more of that."

"I only wish I could have kept my crossbow. I've had it for so long, it feels wrong to be leaving Pakistan without it."

Honestly, Stan couldn't disagree more. The first time he had seen it, it had been pointed at his head. The last time, they killed that sheep and were held hostage by the Peris. That thing was bad luck, and he was happy to see it go.

He didn't voice any of these thoughts to his brother, though.

"Well, think of the bright side: at least you can get a new, *different* weapon."

"I suppose you're right," Ford replied, a tad glum. "After that warning, it would be foolish not to."

Stan looked around at those words, suppressing a shiver down his spine as he patted his brother's back and kept walking.

Still, both of them had learned a valuable lesson that day: watch where you point your weapons. You never know when they'll be pointed right back at you.

Drop Bear

I thought these were a hoax! The vicious relative of the docile koala, but twice the size—these marsupials are horrifying!

*??⚓ 🗡🌲!

Covered in a coarse fur of mottled coloration, Drop Bears hide in plain sight above unsuspecting tourists and aim for the head. They make an awful, guttural yelping noise and their claws easily rend flesh.

We had the unfortunate luck of meeting one of these creatures during our expedition in the forested landscape of the Great Dividing Range. Just south of the city of Newcastle, a friendly young local recommended the picturesque area of the Watagans National Park as a great place to observe the native Australian flora and fauna—and potentially some native cryptids as well!

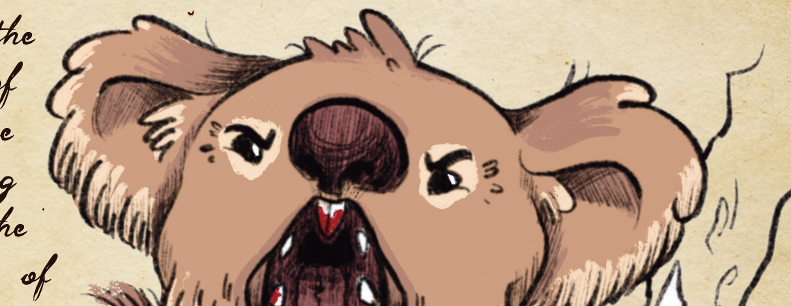


fig. 1 – Thylarctos Plummetus

IT ATTACKED ME!

She described a few genuine mythos of the continent, including the Bunyip and the Yowie, both of which I was eager to catch a glimpse of. She chuckled as she added, "Oh, and there's also the Drop Bear—but those are pretty rare." If only I'd known the state of our luck...

We headed off at once to the Park (in our rental car—Stanley drives surprisingly well on the "wrong" side of the road). Soon, we found ourselves in the serendipitously named Pines Picnic Area, where we stopped to stretch our legs and find a place nearby to set up camp. As the sun set over the tall, gnarled trees, we set out to explore. We observed a few native animals scurrying around the brush and heard the strange calls of many native birds. It was quite peaceful... until I was struck from above by something large, heavy, and howling! One of these "rare" Drop Bears had caught me by surprise! Stanley, doing what he does best, punched the beast square in the face, causing it to screech and scurry off. Thankfully, it only left a couple of short gashes on my shoulder—I think it got the short end of the stick!

The locals say there are a few ways to ward off Drop Bears; namely, spreading "Vege-Mate" behind your ears and putting forks in your hair. I might start carrying some in case of the unlikely (and unwanted) event of running into one of these things again!

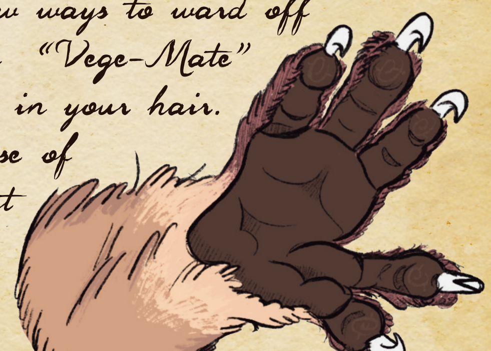
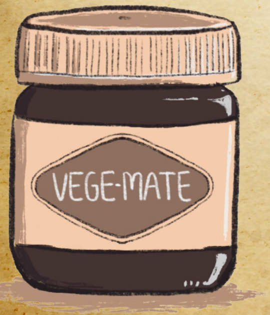


fig. 2 / Unique fingerprints!



Stanley dared me to eat this with a spoon. I regretted doing so almost immediately.

#🗡✋⚓$&!

An (Un)observed Existence

Transcribed for Stanley Pines by Charlotte C.

Author: Charlotte C. | *Spots:* Kazuki Quartz

"Is that it there?"

"That's a rock, Stanley."

"What about that?"

"That is the *exact* same rock."

"Uh, yeah, I knew that. That was a test. I was testin' you."

"Uh-huh," came the sceptical answer. "Perhaps it will be better if you search quietly."

"Did'ya say 'quickly'?" Stan asked, cupping a hand around the back of his ear. "I heard 'quickly'."

"No, I said—" Ford huffed, and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "You've really been spending too much time with the locals. You're not taking this seriously at all."

Stan couldn't help but snort, amused. Considering the circumstances they currently were in, it was hard not to be.

After their many adventures in Europe and Pakistan, the trip down the east coast of Australia had been relatively peaceful, save for that one very memorable run-in with a drop bear, though he still wasn't sure if that had been real or just an elaborate prank by the locals. Not that Stan was complaining if it had been; he liked people that didn't take themselves too seriously, and he'd found the Australians took unseriousness to a whole new level. He'd felt right at home amongst them.

Ford wasn't quite as impressed, but he tolerated it all thanks to a generous supply of coffee and an abundance of strange animals. Safe to say, he was eager to move on.

The plan had been to head down south to Hobart to stock up for their journey ahead. From there, they would go onwards to the Antarctic coast to check out the anomalies that lay hidden along the icy continent, before making their way back north. However, as had often been the case on their travels around the world, they'd gotten a bit sidetracked.

Their food supplies had run out sooner than expected, which had led to them needing to make an emergency stop; and, sure, maybe Stan had pointed out a seaside town on the northern coast of Tasmania called ‘Stanley’ because he thought it would be funny to stay there and take stupid photos of himself in front of anything that had his name on it, but what happened after that was all Ford’s fault.

Someone in the town had mentioned offhandedly that one of his ‘mates’ was going out into the Tarkine to search for the Tasmanian Tiger and bring back proof that the species was still out there.

Unsurprisingly, this immediately caught Ford's interest. To him, an extinct animal wasn't all that different from a cryptid; both had little to no proof they existed. It was the same kind of pursuit, the same kind of mystery; and so, of course, he decided to pursue it. It wasn't long after that that Stan found their finely tuned plans—the plans Ford had been insistent upon following to begin with—being changed.

And now here they were, their boat docked on the edge of a river so small it barely showed up on the state map, the two of them smack bang in the middle of huge rainforest, trying to find the elusive, definitely extinct, thylacine.

So, yeah, hard to take seriously. Still, Stan was quick to rub the amusement from his face when he found himself on the end of one of Ford’s huffy glares.

“If you didn’t want to come,” his brother said, “you could have stayed on the boat.”

“Like I’d leave you alone in a forest. Who d’ya take me for?” A moment later, he added, “I just think we’re wastin’ our time here lookin’ for this thing. We should be in Hobart by now.”

“This is a necessary delay. I’ll account for it.”

“Really? So, when I wanted to stay overnight in town to see the little penguins—an animal that is 100% alive and well by the way—that was an *‘unnecessary’* delay,” Stanley said with finger quotes, “but when you want to stumble around in the wilderness lookin’ for some ghost story, that’s fine?”

“There are penguins in Antarctica, Stanley. I'm sure you'll see plenty while we’re there.”

“Not the point.” He swatted away some ferns in his path and thought longingly of the trail they’d left an hour before. There’d even been a staircase up from the river, which sure as hell would have been useful now. He was lucky he hadn’t fallen down the slope they were now traversing.

“This ain’t exactly the kind of cryptid we usually look for, Ford,” he went on. “This is an animal that went extinct almost 100 years ago.”

“Supposedly,” Ford said, raising a finger. “There have been several sightings of the tiger roaming the wilderness in the last few decades, some of which were from very credible sources.”

“Credible ain’t exactly the same as *proven*.”

“Well, that's why we're here.” Ford lifted up the camera that hung around his neck. “To open up the box and prove it's alive, once and for all.”

Stan fiddled with his own camera, biting back the worst of his grumbling. He loved his brother to bits, no doubt about that, but Ford really could be so prideful sometimes. Just because they kept running into cryptids on their trip around the world didn't mean he was a magnet for them. They were just lucky, that's all, and Stan was pretty sure luck wouldn't help them here.

“I don't think this Looney Toons character is gonna treat us special just because you're here to—”

“Taz is a Tasmanian *devil*. Not a Tasmanian tiger. They’re different animals.”

“And yet you still knew who I meant.” He rubbed at his nose. “Do you really think we’re gonna find this thing? After so many others have tried?”

Ford hesitated, and for the first time, his smile fell, replaced by something more sombre. “I know there's a chance we won’t find anything. Odds are, it really is gone. But when has that ever stopped us before? It’s worth at least trying, isn’t it?”

And damn it all, how could Stan say no to something like that? “Fine,” he said. “But I’m not stayin’ here overnight, alright? I have my limits.”

Ford's smile returned in full force. “Of course,” he said. "If we haven't found something in the next hour, we’ll head back; you have my word.”

They continued on. The slope they were walking down grew all the steeper, enough to make walking across the moss-covered ground all the more treacherous; and yet, Ford kept trekking onwards. Which meant—begrudgingly, and with only a little bit of complaining—so did Stan.

The further they ventured down into the valley, the more the forest around them greyed and dimmed as fog began to shroud the trees around them. Even the sounds of birds in the canopy overhead seemed to quiet. It was as if the two of them had passed a boundary they weren't supposed to cross, which was enough to make a shiver run up Stan’s spine. He’d walked through the woods around Gravity Falls enough to know when a place wasn’t meant for humans.

“We should probably start headin’ back to Lovers Falls,” Stan said, glancing at the fading trees around them, trying his best to keep the tension out of his voice. At this point, he wouldn’t be surprised if red curtains showed up and he got swallowed up by the forest. "Before we get lost.”

Ford scoffed. “We won't get lost. I know the way back.”

“Yeah? You left a trail of breadcrumbs or somethin’?”

“No, don’t be ridiculous; the wildlife would simply eat it. I have a map,” he said, holding up the folded page as he spoke like a child at show and tell.

“Notoriously useful in forests,” Stan snarked.

“I also have a compass,” Ford added, not hearing—or, more likely, choosing to ignore—Stan's sarcasm. “Besides, we still have some time before I said we'd start heading back. I want to keep looking.”

Stan sighed. “Fine. But I gotta stop for a sec, alright. My legs are killin’ me.”

Ford nodded, eyes focused ahead. “While you do that, I'm going to check that tree over there. It looks like it has scratch marks.”

Stan waved him off and plopped himself down on the nearest tree root. It was no armchair, that was for sure, but all the same, he let out a relieved groan, glad to be off his feet. He shook off his rucksack and rummaged around inside it until, with a triumphant ‘aha!’, he pulled out the trail mix he’d prepared ahead of the trip. Ford had disapproved of just how many M&M’s were in there, but it’s not like he’d tried stopping Stan from putting them in either. Pros of having a walking sweet tooth for a brother.

Stan munched on a few handfuls and looked in the direction Ford had gone. “Hey,” he called out, “you want some?”

There was no reply. Unsurprising, really; once something caught Ford’s eye, he didn’t really pay much attention to anything else.

Stan shrugged. “Your loss.” He put the mix away and brushed his hands on his pants. “Just don’t complain that I ate all of it when—”

A crack of laughter erupted from behind him, and Stanley jumped up with a yelp, only to let out a huff when he saw it was nothing more than a kookaburra singing high up in the branches.

“What’chu laughin’ ‘bout,” Stanley muttered, glad his brother hadn’t been around to see him get freaked out by some bird.

Wait.

Where *was* Ford? Because he sure as hell wasn’t near the tree he’d been beside before. Not that Stan could really see it anymore; the fog had thickened all the more in the last few minutes, enough that he could only just make out the shape of the trees surrounding him.

“Stanford?” he called out. When no answer came, he tried again, louder. “Stanford! Where are you?”

His voice echoed back towards him, as if the fog had not let it escape beyond it.

He knew, logically, the best course of action when you got lost in a forest was to stay put and wait for someone to find you, but right now, logic wasn't really at the forefront of his mind. His brother was lost, and he sure as hell wasn't gonna just stand around and hope he came back. That just wasn't something he did.

So, he started to walk in the direction he hoped his brother had gone. As he wandered onwards, he kept calling out for Ford, hoping his voice would be enough to draw him back.

Only the fog replied as Stan walked and walked. If not for the smudges of trees around him and the mossy ground underfoot, he could have all too easily believed he'd left the forest behind entirely and travelled to a land of dreams. He wasn't even sure he was moving forward; he could swear he'd seen the tree he was currently passing twice already. It was hard to tell, given that pretty much all the trees looked the same, especially in the fog, but its odd, twisted shape certainly looked familiar.

Nah, it couldn't be the same. His eyes were just playing tricks on him, that's all. He shook his head and continued on.

His call continued to go unanswered, and he fretted his fingers together, doing his best not to think too hard about what that meant. Maybe he *should* do the whole breadcrumbs trick Ford had scoffed at; sure, it wouldn't help him find his way out of here, but it might just lead Ford back. He'd take any stupid idea if it meant—

Okay. So that was *definitely* the same tree.

"How the hell..." he muttered. There was no way he'd walked in a circle.

Fine, whatever; if going uphill kept leading him here, he'd just turn around and try the other way. Take that, stupid forest.

Determined, he marched back down the hill, away from that tree.

Only to come across it again a few minutes later.

"You've gotta be kiddin' me!" he shouted, throwing his hands up. "Why can't nature ever be normal?"

A crunch of footsteps to his left drew his attention, and he let out a sigh of relief as he saw a shape walking through the fog, still too thick for him to make out anything more than a greyed blur.

"Ford," he said as he turned towards his brother, "oh, Moses, there you are! I've been lookin' for you everywhere. This damn forest is—"

The shape came to a stop at the precipice of a ledge, and Stanley's words fell away.

That was *not* Ford.

In the fog, all he could make out of the creature was its wolfish outline, big enough that if it stood on its hindlegs, it would be as tall as—if not taller than—Stan himself.

Stanley took a step back before he could stop himself, and a stick cracked underfoot. The shadow's ears pricked up, and it leaned down to leap from the ledge. Everything Stan had ever learnt about dealing with wild animals got thrown out the window like a bag of stolen cash as panic quickly took over.

"Nope," he said, turning away to sprint as fast as possible to as *far away* as possible from whatever hell kind of monster that was.

Of course, it was then that the forest decided to finally trip him up, a root catching on his foot and sending him sprawling to the ground.

He heard something shatter beneath him; it took him a frantic moment to realise it was not any of his bones—because wouldn't that just be his luck—but the lens of his camera. If this monster didn't kill him, then Ford sure as hell would. He didn't waste any time trying to fix it, instead rolling on his back so he could face the creature head on.

He wouldn't go down without a fight, especially not when his brother was lost somewhere out in the forest.

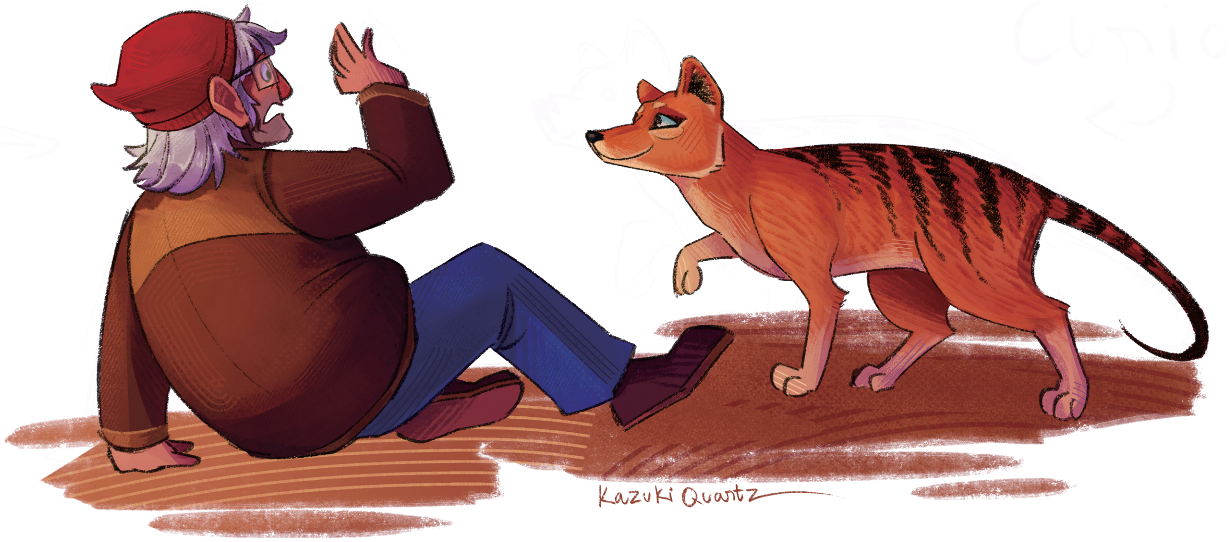
The shadow jumped down from the ledge with ease and ventured towards him. He tensed, hoping it would ignore him if he stayed still, but his efforts to do just that were quickly thwarted when the creature came close enough for him to finally, truly see it.

He couldn't hold back his gasp.

It was the thylacine. It was the goddamn *thylacine*.

He really hated when Ford was right.

It loomed over him, and it was only then that he remembered his plan to fight back. He raised his fists, ready to punch and kick if it so much as made any hints it was about to lunge.



But it didn't. It didn't even growl. It did something he hadn't been expecting at all.

It sniffed at his hand, just like a curious dog would upon meeting a new human. It didn't seem to mind how tense he was, or how he flinched when he felt the heat of its breath. He shouldn't have been feeling anything. It was supposed to be extinct! And yet...here it was, inspecting him curiously, as if run-ins like this were standard fare for it.

It drew back with a snort, and then, as if bored, it yawned, giving Stan an all too intimate close-up of its toothy, practically unhinged jaw. He drew back from it with a grimace. But still, it made no move to bite him, instead turning away to plod back towards the fog.

Stanley let out his breath, feeling all too much like someone who'd miraculously escaped a great white shark. He was too old for crap like this. When he found Ford he was—

Ford. His fear shifted, and he looked back out into the fog. Sure, he may have run into the very thing they'd been looking for, but right now, that didn't matter. He needed to find his brother.

The thylacine caught his attention again when it jumped back up onto the ledge it had appeared from. Stan was afraid it would disappear and leave him alone in the forest, but it stopped at the edge of the fog and glanced back towards him. It took Stanley a moment of staring at it, still stuck in the midst of his disbelief, to realise it was waiting.

“You... want me to follow you?”

It did not answer, but its eyes remained intent on him. Stan slowly pushed himself to his feet, watching it in return, wary that it would run away at the sound of his movement. It stayed, unfrightened. Carefully, minding the sticks underfoot, Stan took a step forward, and then another. Only then did the thylacine move, plodding forward into the mist. Stan waited in place, only taking another step when he saw it glance back at him once, still showing the same patience.

There was no doubt about it; it was leading him. To where, he had no idea. It could be leading him to a secondary location to do away with him, for all he knew. On any other day, he wouldn’t even have entertained the frankly stupid idea of following a wild, *carnivorous* animal through the woods, but it wasn’t like he could get more lost, and he wasn’t against punching an extinct animal in the face if push came to shove. So, against his better judgement, he followed it.

Despite the fathomless expanse that surrounded them, the thylacine seemed to know exactly where to go, though Stanley kept an eye out for that damn tree all the same, just in case. Thankfully, it did not make any more reappearances.

For the first time since Ford had disappeared, Stan felt like he was finally going the way he needed to go.

As soon as he had the thought, he began to hear a muffled but gloriously familiar voice in the distance.

“Stanley? Stanley! Where are you?”

“Ford!” Stan yelled back, his pace picking up. "I'm here! I'm comin’!

“Stanley!” his brother called back with clear delight.

Stan raced ahead past the tiger towards the sound of Ford’s voice, unable to hold back the swell of relief that flooded him the moment he saw his brother appear from the fog.

He didn't waste time, grabbing Ford by the shoulders and pulling him into a fierce hug. Ford quickly sunk into it. For a time, they said nothing at all, simply glad to have found their way back to one another once more.

"'Won't get lost,' my ass," Stanley said once he was sure his emotions were well and truly out of his system.

Ford laughed, sheepish. "Yes, well, it seems I may have underestimated the power of this forest." He pulled away with a frown. "How exactly did you find me?"

"Uh," Stanley said, rubbing his neck, unsure how to explain. "So, you're not allowed to say 'I told you so'."

"About what?"

"About—" he began, only to be interrupted by Ford's eyes going wide.

The thylacine stood at the edge of the fog, watching them both with a strange, otherworldly kind of intelligence, as if it could see far beyond what an animal was supposed to. Stan wasn't even sure it *was* an animal. It felt...greater than that.

Ford, for a moment, did nothing more than stare at it, wide-eyed, his mouth open wide enough to catch more flies than honey. Then he seemed to remember himself, and he fumbled for his camera.

In his frenzy, it kept slipping through his fingers, and, frustrated, he glanced down to make sure he got a good grip on the camera at the same time that Stan looked over to see what he was doing. It was only a moment, barely a second, that the two of them did not have eyes on the thylacine, but it was enough.

There was no crack of branches, no rustle of leaves, but when they looked up, Ford with his camera now at the ready, they found only an empty space where the tiger had once been.

It was as if it'd simply become part of the fog. Or, rather, like it had only ever been fog to begin with. But, even as he thought it, the fog began to part right where the thylacine had stood, as if the creature had taken it along to wherever it had disappeared. The forest, once a grey blur of trees, now stood vivid and green around them.

And there, ahead of them, Stan could see the edges of the trail they'd left behind. The very same one they'd left hours before.

Stan stared at the absence the thylacine had left behind, not sure quite what to believe about what he'd just seen.

"That was real, wasn't it?" Stan said. "We didn't just dream that whole thing up in some... whatever that French phrase is."

"Folie à deux," Ford said absently, his own gaze stuck in place. "And, no...I don't think so."

"Was it a ghost?" He thought of the way it had sniffed his hand, the warmth of its breath and how alive it had felt. "Or was it...?"

“I don't know,” Ford whispered.

He lowered his camera, the film inside it unused. Just like many that had come before them, they had no proof to give of what they'd seen. And yet, it was not disappointment that Stan found Ford's eyes, but delight—the kind that came whenever he had a revelation.

“Maybe we’re not supposed to.”

Stanley blinked. “To know?” he asked, surprised to hear such a thing from his know-it-all brother.

“To prove it.”

“But that was the whole reason we came out here,” Stanley said. “Why the heck would you change your mind now after *actually* seein’ it?”

Ford adjusted his glasses, his eyes still fixed on the place where the tiger had been standing. “By all accounts, the thylacine should no longer exist; not after all these years. And yet, people still let themselves believe in it, simply because of that very important question: what if? What if it is alive? What if, despite everything that was done by us to destroy it, it survived? Maybe it's that question, that ‘what if’, that keeps it existing. So… why answer it?”

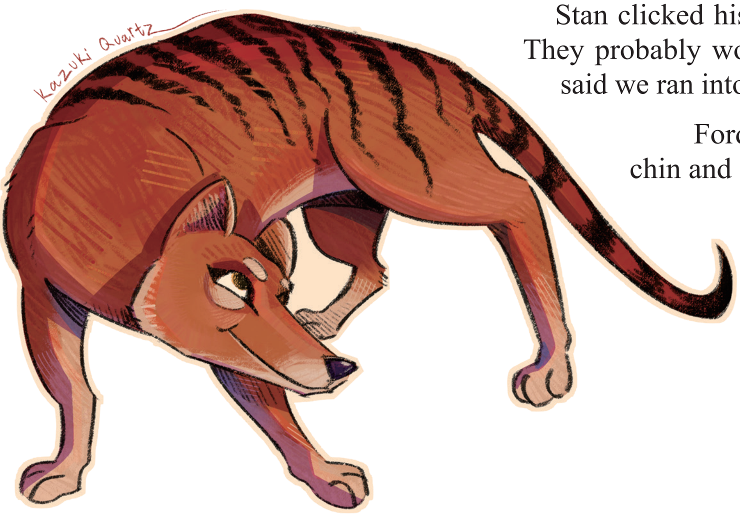
For a moment, Stan saw himself before the portal, staring up at its inert and dusty frame, unsure if who he was searching for beyond it was still out there after all these years, but choosing against all odds and with no proof to believe he was. That little bit of hope had been a powerful thing indeed.

The scene faded, and Stan smiled. “Not like anyone here would ever believe us anyway.”

Ford let out a laugh. “No, I suppose not. I'm sure the kids would though.”

“They've seen dinosaurs. After that, I'm sure they'll believe us about any extinct animals we see. I could say we ran into that... what was the giant wombat thing we saw in that museum in Sydney?”

“The Diprotodon?”



Stan clicked his fingers. “Yeah, that thing. They probably wouldn't even question it if I said we ran into one of those.”

Ford pressed his fingers to his chin and got a thoughtful look on his face, the dangerous kind that Stanley recognised all too well. He sighed.

“No, we are not lookin’ for a Diprotodon,” he said flatly.

Ford didn't answer, but the slight, disappointed pout he wore was enough to make Stan roll his eyes with affectionate exasperation.

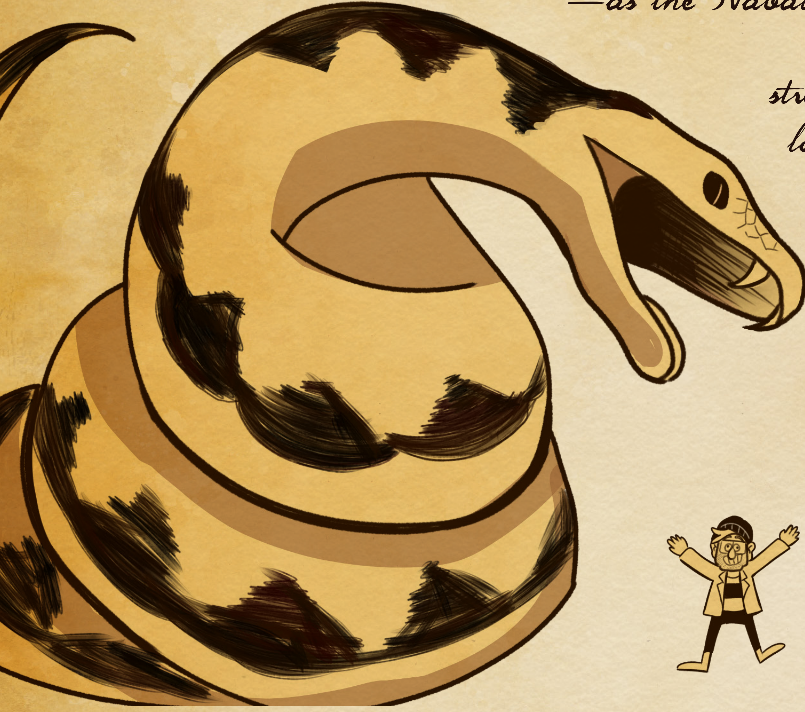
“Come on,” he said, wrapping his arm around Ford’s, making sure they wouldn't get separated again on their journey back to the boat. “I think the thylacine showed us the way out. And we still have a long way to go.”

@TeaRosePedall

The Nabau

Southeast Asia is home to countless cryptids, but few as enigmatic—or enormous—as the Nabau.

An ancient serpent stretching over 100 feet long, with the girth of a drum tower, it is said to be a guardian of the rivers by the Dayak people.



STANLEY FOR REFERENCE

While mapping arcane flux along the Kapuas River, our guide abruptly refused to continue. He pointed at the water and muttered, "Nabau don't like outsiders."

Then he booked it into the trees.

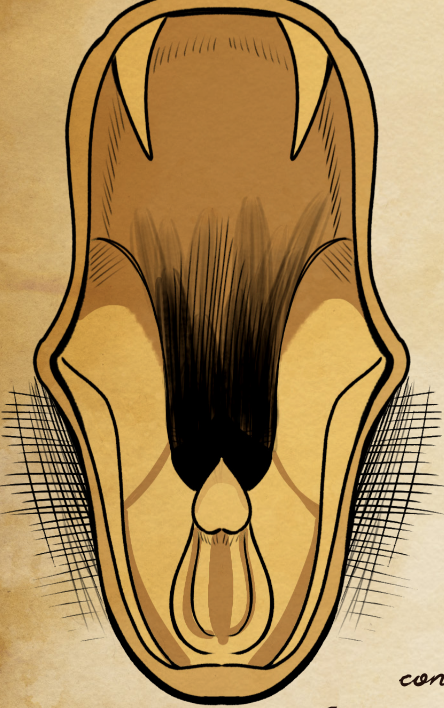
Stanley—naturally—decided this was the perfect time for a skinny dip

BAD. IDEA!!!

"I swear on the Pines family name, Ford, that orangutan THREW MY FLIP-FLOP BACK AT ME. I've been disrespected by an oversized monkey!"

While Stanley flailed about in the water, I observed a dark, sinuous shape under the surface—moving without displacing the current. No visible fins or limbs. Only a wake and a deep thrumming—a sound I could feel in my ribcage.

Stanley insists it was "just a big eel." I reminded him eels don't make river water ripple upstream.



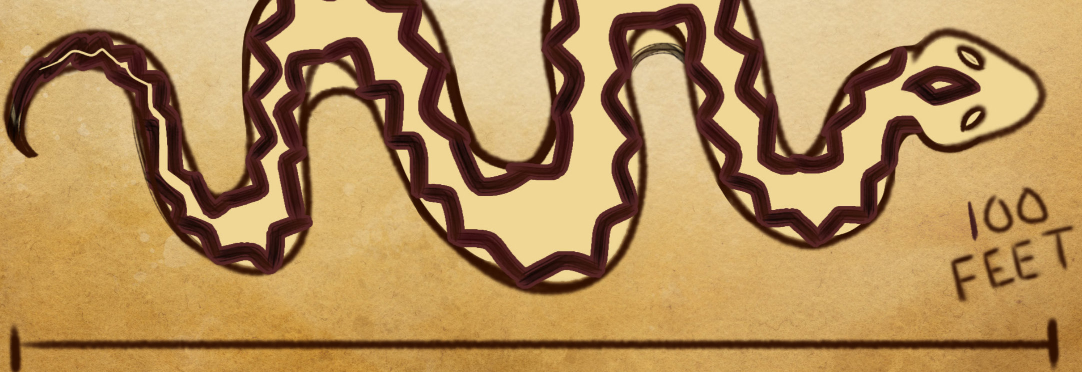
NOTES & WARNINGS

- Nabau is not inherently hostile, but does not tolerate disruption.
- Locals appease it with camphor offerings and river chants.
- Possibly sensitive to electromagnetic interference—our compass spun wildly just before it appeared.
- **STAN: DO NOT FEED IT HOT DOGS.** (Or yourself)
- If the water goes still—too still—get out. That means it's watching.

GJ ESQTW VG

The Nabau may be a psionic cryptid connected to ancient elemental spirits of water. Its appearance may correlate with fault line activity—more research needed. Possibly older than some river systems.

Whatever the Nabau is—be it serpent spirit or something stranger—it reminds me that the world is still full of wonders. Not every mystery is dangerous. Some are just... ancient. And tired of being disturbed.



The Banaspati

The Banaspati is an exceptionally rare pyro-spectral entity native to the dense jungles of Java and the surrounding volcanic regions. It manifests as a floating orb of intense flame approximately 0.5 to 1 meter in diameter, occasionally revealing a distorted humanoid skull within the inferno.

According to legends and locals, this entity is likely the result of a failed black magic ritual, causing a restless spirit to become bound in an ethereal plasma form. It emits intensethermal energy, sufficient to ignite organic material at close range, yet remains intangible to physical capture.

The thing caught me off guard by pretending to be a campfire. It successfully burned my eyebrows and other hairy... unmentionables...

Apparently, Stan saw a lit campfire in the middle of the deep dark forest with no footprints, ALRIGHT I GET IT!! with no sign of recent human activity, and proceeded to lie and say he lit it.

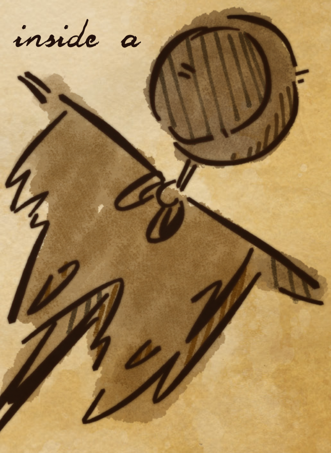
HEY! IF NATURE WANTS TO BE HOSPITABLE,
WHY TURN THEM DOWN?

After weeks of tracking the Banaspati and narrowly avoiding being flambéed alive, I believed I had finally discovered the perfect containment method: trapping the entity inside a Jailangkung spirit doll.

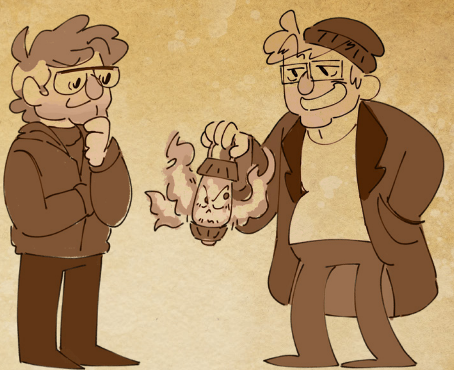
Stan called it "ghost Tupperware."

I called it science.

WE WERE BOTH WRONG.



The ritual began at midnight in the cemetery clearing. I'd carved the Jailangkung from pohonkelor (moringa wood), a known baneful material for cursed entities, and added jointed limbs and a cavity inside the head for a binding sigil in the local script. Everything was by the book—a very dangerous and probably cursed book—and for once, even Stanley stayed relatively quiet. It turned out, he was concocting a plan to trap the Banaspati inside an iron lantern.



Clearly, this would not have worked!

When I began the incantation, the Banaspati emerged from the treeline like a floating bonfire with teeth. The ground shimmered from the heat; my notes nearly caught fire just from its proximity. I held the Jailangkung aloft, chanting the words exactly as translated. The doll began to vibrate, its painted eyes flickering as the flames circled inward—

And then it screamed. **THE DOLL SCREAMED.**

The Banaspati's fire shot straight into the wooden vessel, and for a brief, glorious moment, I thought it had worked. The flames twisted, collapsed inward, and vanished with a low hum.

The air was still.

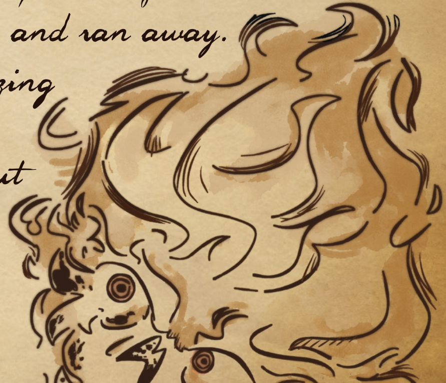
Just as I began to walk back to Stanley, the doll's head exploded.

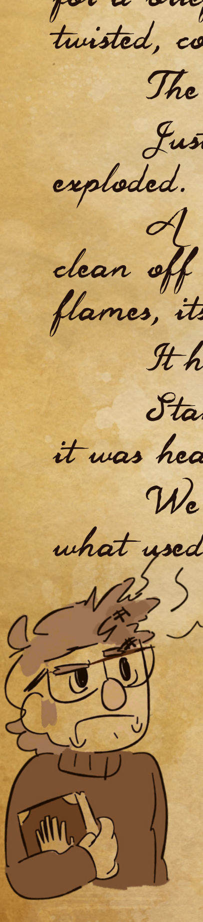
A column of red fire erupted, scorching my other eyebrow clean off (that was my favorite one!). The doll's torso burst into flames, its limbs flailing like it was trying to pat itself out.

It hopped three times, cursed in Javanese, and ran away.

Stan chased it for ten meters before realizing it was heading directly toward our tent.

We spent the next hour stamping out what used to be our sleeping bags.





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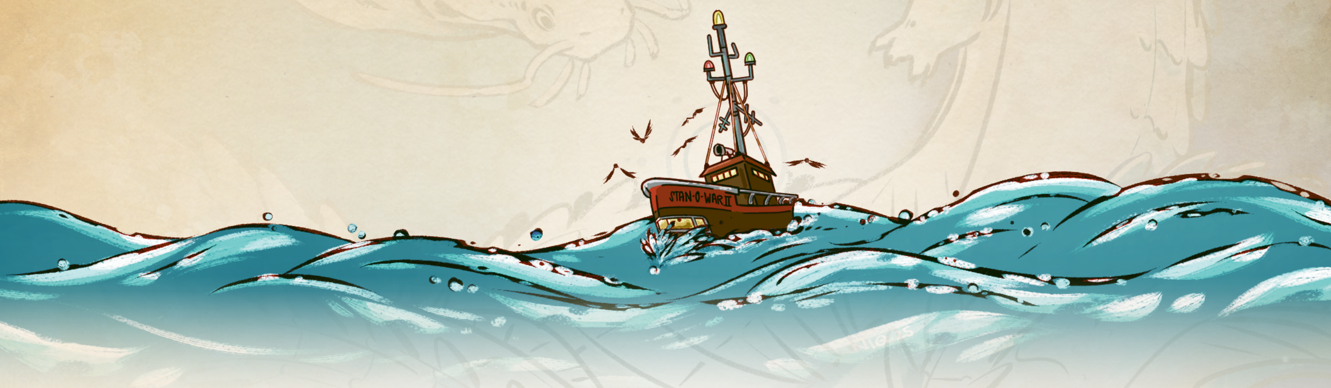
DO NOT READ OUT LOUD
IF YOU HAVE A DOLL NEARBY!!

Looking back, I don't know if we were prepared for what came next...

Bakunawa

Author: Xojhi | *Spots:* Niq

There was a time when the idea of retirement sounded like paradise to Stanley Pines: days of freedom, no more world-ending chaos, maybe the occasional piña colada with a tiny umbrella in it.



Their boat, the Stan O' War II, creaked and groaned like an old man complaining about his joints as they approached the mist laced archipelago of a country called ‘Philippines’. Stanley leaned over the splintery railing, squinting at the lush outlines forming through the fog. He reached over and gave Ford’s map a once-over. It was the usual mess of scribbles, coffee stains, and Cryptid-related footnotes that somehow still managed to get them from place to place without falling off the edge of the Earth.

Stanley snorted, elbowing his brother lightly in the ribs. “Heh, it has the same last name as us. What’d you do, Ford, get hitched to a tropical island while I wasn’t lookin’? Run off with a beach spirit named *Phyllis Pines*?”

Ford didn’t even glance up from the desk inside the cabin, where he was hunched over his journal. “Very funny, Stanley,” he muttered, deadpan. “You’re not pronouncing it properly.”

Stanley laughed. “Look, I ain’t marrying anything I can’t pronounce without a guidebook.”

Ford finally looked up, adjusting his glasses with a look that hovered somewhere between exhaustion and excitement. “It’s pronounced *Phil-ih-peens*, and no, I did not marry an island. If I had, they'd have kicked you off the deck by now.”

Stanley gasped, clutching his chest dramatically. “Betrayed! I can’t believe you’d leave me for an archipelago, Ford–after everything we’ve been through!”

Ford waved a hand dismissively. “I should’ve left you for an atoll. They complain less.”

“Oh ho!” Stanley grinned. “So you have considered running off with geological formations. Next thing I know, I’ll find you cuddling with a tectonic plate!”

“Only if it was more structurally stable than this conversation,” Ford muttered, turning back to his journal.

“Hey, don’t blame me when your new wife—uhm, er—or husband, turns out to be a volcano with commitment issues!” The way Stan burst out chuckling at his own lines made it impossible for Ford to maintain his usual grumpy composure.

He tried to keep writing, even muttering, “I’m documenting a rare maritime anomaly, not participating in a stand up routine,” but the smirk on his face gave him away.

As their laughter faded into the steady hush of waves against the hull, a quiet settled between them, lived in and familiar—the kind of silence you only earn after decades of shouting, making up, and surviving things you’d rather not talk about unless you're already three drinks deep and marooned on some bizarre sea.

They went back to their rhythm without needing to say anything more, Ford scribbling notes about the weather patterns and invisible ley lines he swore were charted in the sky, Stan keeping a steady eye on the horizon, searching for the telltale shimmer that usually preceded one of their more “unusual” destinations.

The Stan O’ War II swayed gently beneath them, its old wood groaning like it was mildly offended at the ocean for disturbing its nap. Somewhere out there, beyond the pale mist and rolling waves, was land, and maybe even answers. For now, though, there was only the sea, the creaking boat, and the company of a brother who—despite everything—still knew how to make the other laugh.

Storm clouds flirted on the horizon, and the air had grown heavy with humidity and something… older.

“I’m telling you, Stanley,” Ford said, peering through his binoculars with a look that screamed ‘*academic thirst for danger,*’ “there are verified sightings. Bioluminescent scales, tidal disruptions, lunar disappearances. This could be the closest we’ve ever gotten to a Class-X cryptid!”

“Uh huh,” Stan muttered, prying a barnacle off the deck with a spatula.

"And how many times has 'this could be it' turned out to be a fish with a bad skin condition?"

Ford didn't answer; he was too busy scribbling down notes with the kind of manic energy Stan usually reserved for poker nights.

They had been sailing for weeks, eating too much canned tuna, arguing about whose turn it was to clean the bilge, and dodging giant squid that apparently didn't appreciate being photographed. Ford's obsession with cryptids hadn't waned one bit since Weirdmageddon. In fact, if anything, the apocalypse seemed to have only added fuel to the fire.

Stan had to admit, it was kinda nice to see his brother so alive again, in a *mad-scientist-who-needs-sleep* kind of way. "Alright, Sixer," Stan said as the fog thickened. "Are you sure this is the place?"

"The coordinates match. Local reports indicate several lunar eclipses with no scientific explanation, not to mention myths dating back centuries… We're close."

"Great," Stan grunted. "Just what I always wanted, to be eaten by a sea demon."

The fog began to peel back, revealing a jagged stretch of coastline framed by towering cliffs and tangled jungle. Birds shrieked in the canopy, and the water grew unnaturally still.

Ford looked thrilled.

Stanley looked for something sharp to hold onto.

They anchored in a small cove with no modern docks in sight, just a narrow strip of beach surrounded by mangroves and limestone caves. The air smelled of salt, wet leaves, and something faintly metallic.

Ford swore he saw phosphorescent trails slipping through the shallows. Stan swore he saw a floating log blink at him.

"This is it," Ford whispered. "Sacred territory."

"Alright," Stan replied. "Let's try not to die, McGucket still owes me money from the last bet."

They ventured inland with backpacks. Ford carried an arsenal of notebooks, specimen jars, and his homemade electromagnetic frequency scanner. Stan carried snacks and a baseball bat labeled '*Just In Case.*'

The forest was alive with sound—whirring insects, hooting birds, and the distant crash of waves—but there was an underlying silence beneath it all, like the land was listening. It didn't take long for them to realize they weren't alone.

Not in the way that something was watching them—though that was definitely happening—but in the way the forest itself seemed… sentient.

Trees leaned just a little too close, roots like vines brushed their shoulders like they knew you, and at one point, Stan swore he heard a low, mournful *hum* ripple through the air.

Ford dismissed it as wind; Stan was not convinced.

Several hours in, they reached a ridge that overlooked the coastline.

And there it was.

A perfect curve of moonlight on the sea. The kind of view that postcards wish they had the guts to show—but it was more than beautiful. It was *haunted*.

The moon, high and round above them, shimmered on the waves like something was coiling beneath it.

“Stanley,” Ford said softly, lifting his camera. “Look.”

Something was rising in the bay. A massive silhouette breaching the surface just enough to disrupt the reflection. For a split second, they saw scales like shattered glass and something ancient.

Then, it vanished without a sound, as if the water had swallowed its own shadow.

They stared. The trees didn’t move; the air held its breath.

“…Ford?”, Stan asked slowly. “Did the moon just flinch?”

Before his brother could answer, drums began to echo through the forest. Not drums of war, but of celebration—quick, rhythmic, joyous. Lights flickered in the distance.

Ford blinked. “That’s… a village,” he said, surprised.

“Yeah,” Stan said, relaxing just slightly. “And I bet they’ve got food.”

When they pushed through the underbrush, they stumbled into a world of color and light.

The village was alive with song. Paper lanterns in bright oranges and reds swayed from bamboo poles. Children ran barefoot, laughing, their faces painted with swirling patterns. Women wore woven garments with thread like firelight, and the men played instruments carved from wood and bone. A festival was in full bloom.

No one screamed at the sight of two foreigners emerging from the jungle looking like cryptid-hunting hobos. In fact, a group of teenagers immediately handed Stan a coconut with a silly straw and pulled him into a dance.

Ford blinked as an elder approached him, smiling, and spoke in perfect English. “You’re here for the serpent.”

“Er, yes,” Ford said, flustered. “We’ve been researching...anomalous sea activity, lunar discrepancies, mythology surrounding—”

The elder held up a hand, amused. “She stirs sometimes when the moon is full, but she hasn’t eaten in centuries. Come, there's food.” And just like that, they were guests.

As night deepened, Ford sat cross legged by the fire, furiously scribbling in his journal. Stan was already on his second helping of roasted fish, teaching kids how to cheat at cards using banana leaves.

The drums had long fallen silent, and the fire no longer crackled—it pulsed. Each ember glowed with an unnatural rhythm, like the steady beat of a sleeping heart.

The fire burned low, casting long shadows that danced across the village square.

Children huddled close to their parents and the villagers gathered close around the central flame, their faces solemn, turned toward the elder, who had risen without being asked.

Another elder with silver hair braided like vines down her back stepped forward, leaning on a carved walking stick etched with waves and serpent coils. When the elder began to speak, everything stilled. Her voice was soft at first, like the wind brushing the tops of the coconut trees, and then it grew deeper, resonant, echoing off the wooden walls and into the open night.

Her tone changed, deep and melodic; she told stories older than colonization, older than memory. One tale in particular held Ford's full attention.

Ford stilled his pen; Stan stopped chewing his roasted banana; even the insects seemed to hush.

"You come here chasing a serpent," she said, her voice low, dry as leaves. "But most who seek her do not know what they are looking for; what you are chasing is not a beast."

Stanley—now perched on a woven mat beside a bowl of bilo-bilo—squinted suspiciously as she bent down and traced a circle in the earth with her finger.

"You are chasing a wound in the sky."

Stan raised an eyebrow, then whispered to his brother, "Sounds like a metaphor, Ford. I thought we were tracking sea monsters, not therapy."

"*Hush*," Ford muttered, furiously scribbling.

The elder continued, her voice stronger now, riding on the firelight like smoke. "There was a time when the sky was filled with moons—not one, not two, seven."

Gasps rose from the children. The adults merely nodded, solemn.

"Bathala, the supreme deity, shaped them into seven sisters of light. They watched over the earth; they lit the seas; they were music in the dark. But below, in the depths of the ocean, something ancient watched." She turned slowly, eyes sweeping the ring of firelight. "She had a name. *Bakunawa*, the eclipse bringer—the Moon Eater." The name seemed to linger, caught in the leaves above them.

"She was born of ocean and shadow, a serpent so long her coils tangled in the ocean floor. Her breath stirred storms; she shimmered with the stolen colors of the sky: pearled silver, deep indigo, sea glass green." She extended her hand toward the fire, casting an angular shadow that rippled like waves. “Some say she was jealous of the moons’ beauty; others, that she fell in love with them. Their light; their song; their distance.”

Stan leaned toward Ford. “This is starting to sound like one of your weird college crushes.”

Ford ignored him, eyes fixed on the elder.

“One night,” she said, drawing her hand upward as if lifting the moon, “Bakunawa rose, not out of hunger, but longing. She reached into the heavens and devoured the first moon.” A spark cracked sharply from the fire. Several children jumped, a baby whimpered. “The next night, another moon vanished, then another. The sky grew dimmer, colder, as she ate. By the sixth moon, Bathala grew desperate. He cast the last moon behind clouds and commanded the people to make noise—to bang on gongs, to scream into the heavens, to frighten the serpent away.”

The elder pointed a bony finger to the sky. “She came for the seventh, but the people roared. They rattled pans, beat drums, lit fires; and Bakunawa fell, screaming, weeping, back into the sea.” She paused. “But she did not die.”

A gust of wind stirred the trees, though the sky above remained perfectly clear.

“She sleeps in the ocean’s heart, coiled around her sorrow, and when an eclipse comes—when the moon darkens—it is because she is rising again, reaching, trying to finish what she began.” Her voice dropped to a whisper, and yet somehow every word was heard. “And, maybe one day… she may succeed.”

The silence that followed was heavy, unearthly; even the crackling of the fire seemed to pause, as if the flames themselves were listening.

She stepped back and gestured towards the sea. “If you listen to the waves on a windless night,” she said, “you may hear her breathing: soft, slow, like a lullaby being hummed by something with teeth the size of houses.”

Stan glanced at Ford, who sat motionless, caught in the tale like a fly in amber.

“And if she rises again?” Ford asked.

The elder smiled, eyes glinting like wet stone. “Then perhaps the world must listen to her roar... before it’s too late.”

Ford’s pencil paused over the page.

A silence fell over the square, deep and full of something bigger than the night. The flames cracked. Somewhere in the forest, a single bird called, lonely, distant.

Then, without cue, the villagers began to hum a low, melodic tone that seemed to rise from the earth itself. Some rocked gently; others closed their eyes. It was not a song meant for humans—it was a lullaby for the sea.

Then, a teenaged boy picked up a small metal basin and began to bang it slowly with a stick.

Clang Clang Clang

Soon, others joined—a chorus of noise to keep Bakunawa at bay—and it didn't feel like tradition; it felt like insurance.

As the rhythm built, the villagers began to sing. A slow chant, more breath than melody, words older than memory, a ward against waking myths.

The moon hung low over the sea, rippling in the waves. For a moment, Ford thought he saw something disturbing the reflection—just a flicker.

A shadow, a blink in the corner of his eye.

Ford felt a chill slip down his spine. He glanced at Stan, who sat unusually still, half-eaten roasted banana forgotten in hand.

"Okay," Stan whispered, after a beat. "That was... maybe the coolest, creepiest bedtime story I've ever heard."

Ford didn't speak right away. He was still looking toward the ocean, where the waves now shimmered in the light of a half-hidden moon, like something vast and dreaming had stirred in response.

Stan leaned over, voice low. "I swear, if we get swallowed by a lonely moon fish, I'm blaming you."

Ford whispered back, "Then make sure you die on the port side. I want to document the dorsal fins on the way down."

The elders said the eclipse would come that night.

The villagers began preparations before dawn; drums were tuned, basins polished, torches soaked in oil. Children braided coconut fronds into rings, and women drew chalk sigils at the edges of the beach in ancient spirals.

Ford, fascinated, went tent to tent collecting oral histories. Each villager had a slightly different version of the tale; some said Bakunawa fell in love with the moons, others said she wanted to become one herself.

All agreed: when the last moon hides, they must remind her she is still seen.

Stan, meanwhile, helped string up bamboo lanterns while swatting at mosquitoes with a banana leaf.

"They're acting like they're about to throw a party," he muttered. "For a sea snake who tried to eat the sky."

"They are," a boy replied proudly. "Bakunawa doesn't rise to be feared. She rises because she's lonely. We remind her she is still remembered, still honored. So she lets the moon go."

Stan paused. That hit a little too close to home for reasons he'd never admit.

Ford invited Stan along for one last round of observation.

"Not a full expedition," Ford explained. "More like… scientific tourism."

"Is that what we're calling nearly dying now?"

They took a canoe into the river mouth with two teenage guides, bringing only binoculars, a long handled net, and Ford's electromagnetic scope.

The deeper they rowed into the mangrove fed inlets, the more the world fell into hush: no birds, no wind, just the slow creak of wood and the constant ripple of water.

Stan saw them first. Not monsters, but signs: moon-shaped lily pads floating in deliberate clusters; fish swimming in tight spiral patterns; mangrove roots glowing faintly in the shade, like veins pulsing with moonlight.

The kids whispered, "She's close; she listens."

Ford watched his readings spike, then flatline. "She's warping the field. This isn't just magnetic… It's emotional. I think her presence affects the environment based on how people feel about her."

Stan turned slowly. "You're saying the snake has a vibe field?"

"No… well, yes, but more ancient and terrifying."

Before they could argue further, one of the kids tapped the edge of the canoe. "We should go; the moon is almost ready."

The villagers lined the shore in silence, forming a wide circle around a bonfire that crackled with dried coconut husks and bundles of tanglad, turmeric, and crushed sampaguita.

Smoke curled in fragrant spirals, drifting skyward like prayers made visible. The tide was low. The stars were shy behind thin clouds, and above them, the moon had begun to dim, its silver skin slowly devoured by a creeping shadow.

Ford hunched beside the fire, scribbling furiously into his journal even as the lantern light flickered over his pages.

Stan, awkward and solemn, held a wide tin basin, guided into place by a little girl who couldn't have been older than six. She wore painted spirals on her cheeks and a crown of woven palm leaves. Her voice was tiny, but certain. "When the moon disappears," she whispered, "you must make noise, loud, as if your heart is about to burst. That's how she knows we're still here."

Stan nodded mutely, something about her quiet sincerity freezing the usual sarcasm in his throat.

From that moment on, the wind changed. It came not with a howl or rush, but a deep, pulling hush. The air grew impossibly still, and yet the palm trees along the beach began to sway, leaning slightly backward—not from any gust, but from some silent, magnetic pull towards the sea.

The waves, which had lapped gently against the sand just moments before, grew restless, expectant, like the ocean had taken a breath and was holding it.

The horizon split.

No roar, no crashing. The sea simply parted with the elegance of drawn silk, like curtains at a grand stage being peeled aside, revealing a hollow chasm of silver-lit mist housing a presence not bound by physics nor fear.

She rose.

Bakunawa did not explode from the depths like some angry leviathan. She ascended, coiling upward in graceful, impossible arcs.

Her body was immense, too long to see where it began or ended, and shimmered with iridescence, like the inside of a shell soaked in starlight, shifting hues with every breath. Each movement left streaks of moon colored light in her wake.

She was neither beast nor god, but something between; a memory given form, a sorrow given spine.

Her face broke the surface last, long and elegant, shaped like flowing water and ancient stone, with thin, drifting tendrils that moved like underwater smoke. Her eyes, set deep into her skull, glowed with concentric rings of pale gold and black, eclipses forever frozen mid blink.

No one screamed.

They sang.

A chant passed from mouth to mouth, slow and reverent, ancient syllables stitched from languages older than the alphabet or kings. Elders swayed, murmuring low prayers; children tapped stones together; women beat gently on drums and pots. Their rhythm was steady, insistent, alive.

Stan held the basin tighter, breath caught in his throat.

“She’s… she’s listening,” Ford whispered, lowering his journal without realizing it.

Bakunawa hovered in the air, coiled above the water, and turned her great head slowly toward the heavens.

The moon—now barely a sliver—hung trembling in the sky like a coin on the edge of a fall.

Bakunawa opened her jaws.

And the world held its breath.

For a moment, it was heavy, not with fear, but with weight—the kind that presses against your lungs and makes the world stand still.

A stillness like glass before it shatters, a breath held between heartbeats.

Bakunawa’s massive jaws hung open, poised beneath the moon, a silence so complete it rang in their ears like thunder that hadn't struck yet.

No one moved. Not the villagers with their pots and drums; not Ford with his pen frozen mid sentence; not even Stan, who stood rooted in the sand with the basin slipping slightly in his hands.

The air trembled.

She hovered there, suspended above the sea like a living bridge between worlds, her serpentine body coiling through mist and starlight so vast that she seemed to span the ocean and sky at once.

Yet, despite the impossible distance between her and the shoreline, she felt close—too close.

Her skin shimmered with the colors of all the lost moons: blue opal, dying pearl, glass green, eclipse gold. She was not a monster; she was not a creature; she was heavenly. From her snout to the tip of her trailing tail, she carried the sorrow of centuries in every movement. Eyes glowing with eclipse light, she tilted her head upward—slowly, reverently—her gaze never leaving the pale disc of the last moon above.

And her jaws widened, the moon trembling on her mouth.

The entire world seemed to tilt.

Stan felt it in his chest, the quiet panic of witnessing something beautiful about to be broken; he couldn’t move, couldn’t shout, could only stare at the space between that ancient mouth and the last shining moon.

The silence was unbearable.

Then the beach exploded with sound.

Like a dam breaking, the stillness shattered into joyous defiance. Metal bowls were struck, bamboo poles hammered into the earth, voices cried out, not in fear, but in memory. Children danced barefoot, laughing and shouting, their clamor carrying a strength that no ancient beast could swallow.

Stan raised his basin and slammed it with his other hand, the sound ringing through his bones. Ford snapped out of his trance, grabbed two coconut halves, and banged them like he was trying to carve rhythm into the stars.

Villagers stomped, shouted, sang. It wasn’t chaotic; it was sacred.

Bakunawa's great eyes flickered, her open maw halting in mid breath. For a single heartbeat, she simply listened.

Then, gently, slowly, with the aching reluctance of something ancient remembering how to forgive, she closed her jaws.

The moon, that last sacred light, quivered and held. Whole once more.

Above them, the heavens breathed again.

With a final spiral of her glimmering body, the sea embraced Bakunawa as she curled downward, gliding silently back into the sea. Her coils vanished beneath the waves like ribbons in the wind. The ocean closed behind her with a sigh, as if nothing had happened at all.

But the people knew.

They had been seen.

And so had she.

For a long time, no one moved. The waves settled; the air was still. The chanting faded into breathless silence. Even the moon—now full and unblemished once more—hung above the ocean as if in quiet reverence. Only the soft crackle of the bonfire remained, weaving smoke into the star strewn sky.

Everyone erupted into cheers. Laughter and song returned like someone had released a great exhale. Children danced again, beating their basins playfully. Elders clapped their hands and nodded to the stars.

The nightmare that never came had passed, and they had remembered her; that was what mattered.

Stan leaned over, still gripping the rim of his basin like a lifeline. His heart pounded, his palms were damp, and he was grinning. “Ford,” he said, catching his breath, “you okay?”

Ford stood there, frozen, blinking up at the sky like he was still waiting for a second miracle. His soaked journal was cradled against his chest like a newborn, his mouth parted slightly, eyes distant. When he finally spoke, it was in a whisper. “That… that wasn’t just a cryptid.”

Stan arched a brow. “No kidding.”

Ford’s eyes didn’t leave the water. “That was a goddess, a living myth, a sentient legend. Her existence defies taxonomy, defies physics. Stanley, did you see how her scales bent the moonlight? Her body must’ve been refracting lunar rays on multiple spectrums, and her eyes—those concentric eclipse rings—weren't just retinal patterns; that was symbolic, that was intentional design. She was ancient.” He paused, a breath catching in his throat. “She saw us, Stan.”

Stan snorted, nudging him with his elbow. “Yeah, and then she decided not to eat us. Real considerate of her.”

But Ford didn’t laugh; his gaze had shifted from analytical to something deeper. “I’ve never encountered anything like this.”

Stan finally sobered. “She made the ocean kneel.”

Ford nodded slowly. “And I think the ocean was glad to do it.”

Just then, the elder approached them once more. Her presence, despite the celebration around them, was calm and quiet. She carried the scent of burnt herbs and sea salt, and when she smiled, it was like she already knew what they’d say. “She remembers you now," she said softly. "That is a blessing… and a responsibility."

Stan blinked. "You mean, she's gonna visit?"

"Perhaps," the elder replied with a slow, thoughtful nod. "Or perhaps she will wait… until another tide sets in."

Ford clutched his journal tighter, the leather edges damp from salt and sweat. "Fascinating," he muttered.

"I'm going to write a paper on this so long and so thoroughly referenced it'll take a century to forget. I'll send it to every cryptozoological institute, every mythological archive, every university that'll listen—no, even the ones that won't."

Stan chuckled and tossed an arm around his brother's shoulder. "Better include a chapter called '*How I Survived a Myth by Banging a Salad Bowl.*'"

Ford finally cracked a smile; small, tired, but genuine. "That was technically a ceremonial rice basin, thank you."

"And I banged it beautifully," Stan said with mock pride.

They stood together in the glow of the dying fire, watching as the village slowly returned to its rhythm, as stars blinked back into place, and as the sea shimmered with secrets once more.

For Ford, it was the beginning of a hundred theories and a thousand questions.

For Stan, it was something simpler, something quieter…

A moment when the impossible didn't feel so far away.

The village returned to calm; lanterns were taken down, kids slept soundly, their pots and pans beside them like shields. The last of the embers curled upward into the sea salted dawn air.

Stan and Ford stood by the Stan O' War II, preparing to leave.

"You know," Stan said, adjusting his beanie, "I gotta admit… That might've been the first time I got through a monster encounter without screaming or punching anything."

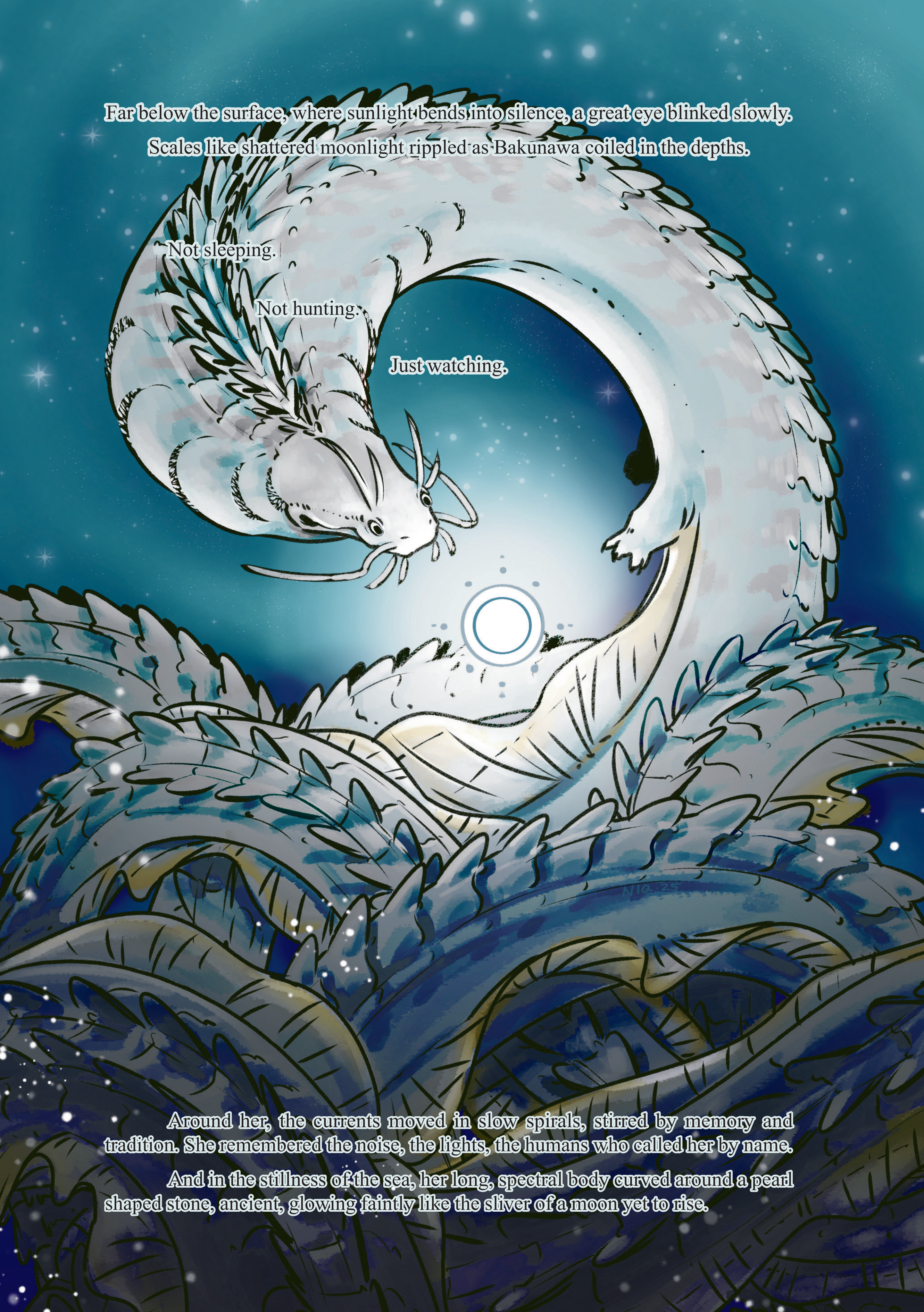
Ford raised a brow. "You screamed; you absolutely screamed."

"It was joyful screaming," Stan shot back. "Festive. Culturally appropriate."

They both laughed, and for a moment, the weight of what they'd seen drifted like mist.

Ford glanced back at the ocean. "Do you think she'll rise again?"

Stan stared at the horizon, thoughtful. "I think she never really left."



Far below the surface, where sunlight bends into silence, a great eye blinked slowly. Scales like shattered moonlight rippled as Bakunawa coiled in the depths.

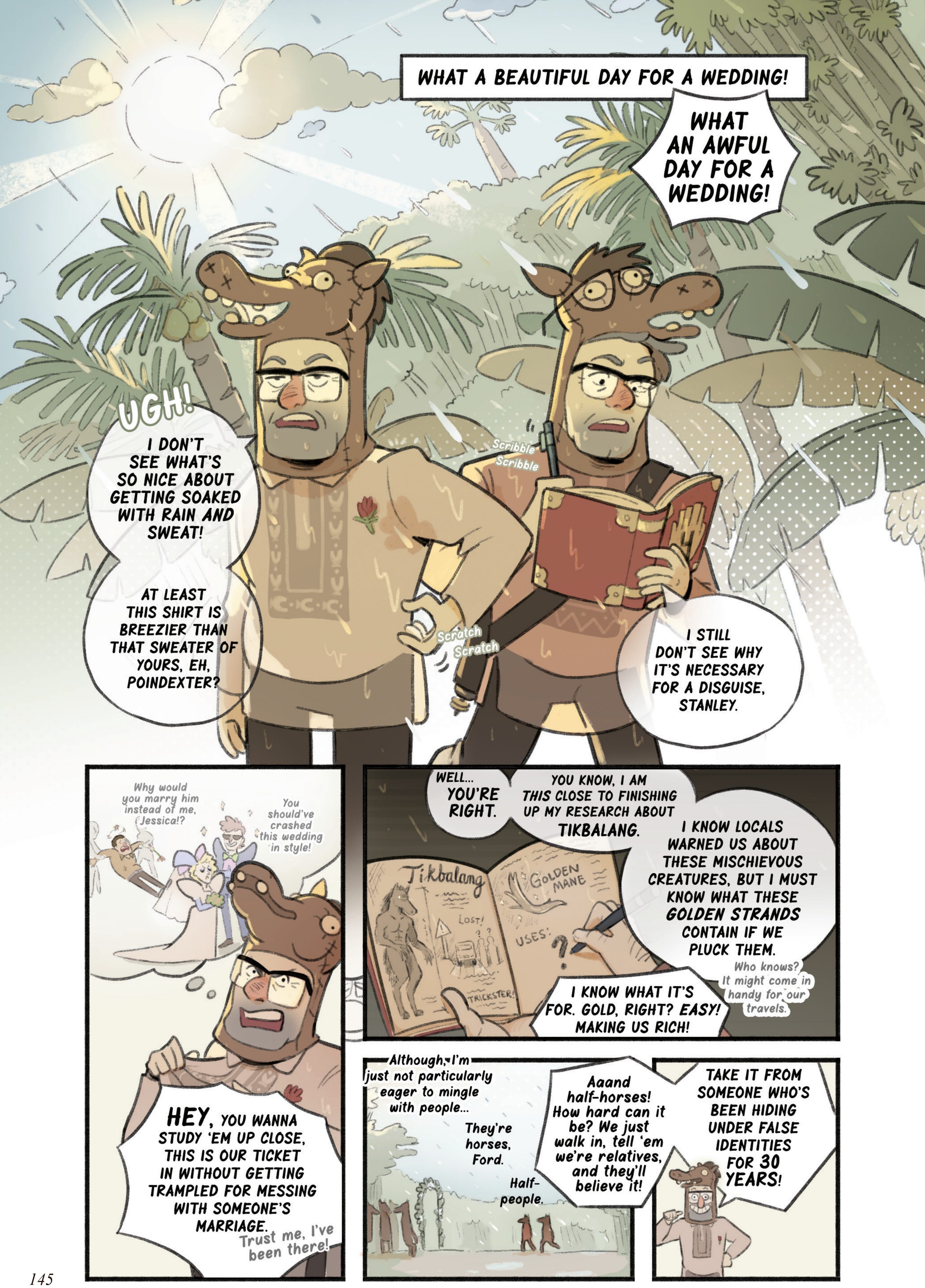
Not sleeping.

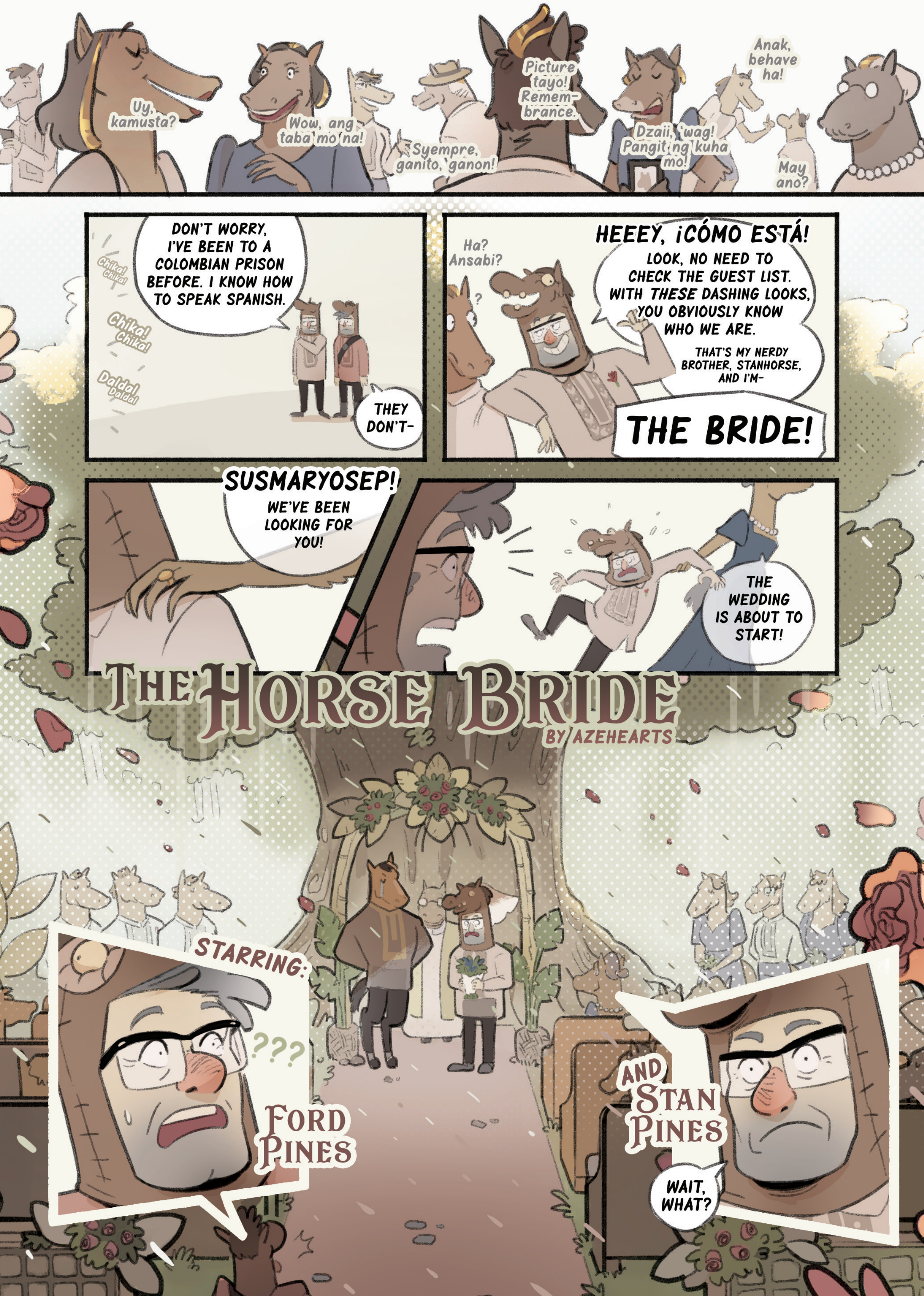
Not hunting.

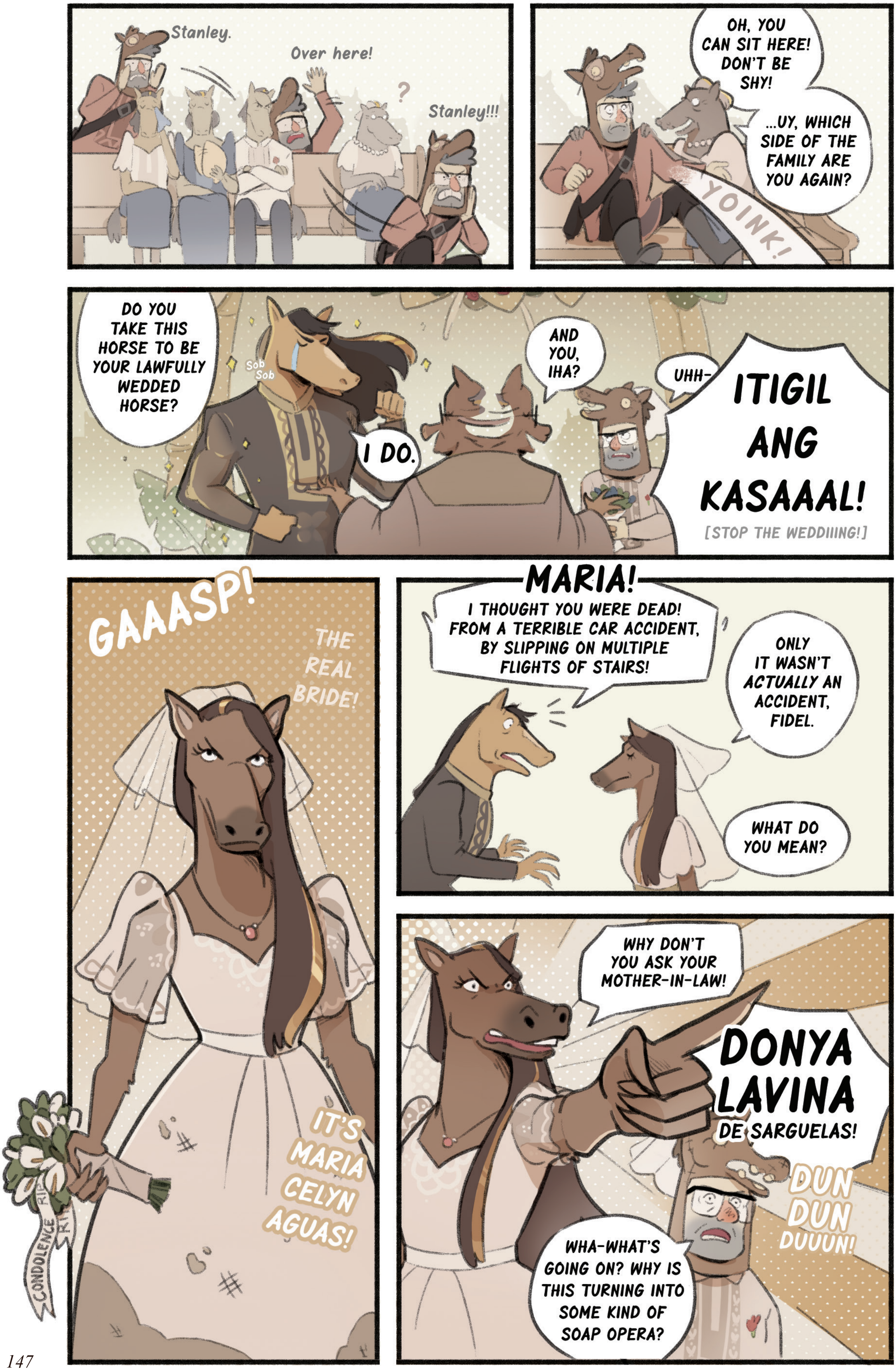
Just watching.

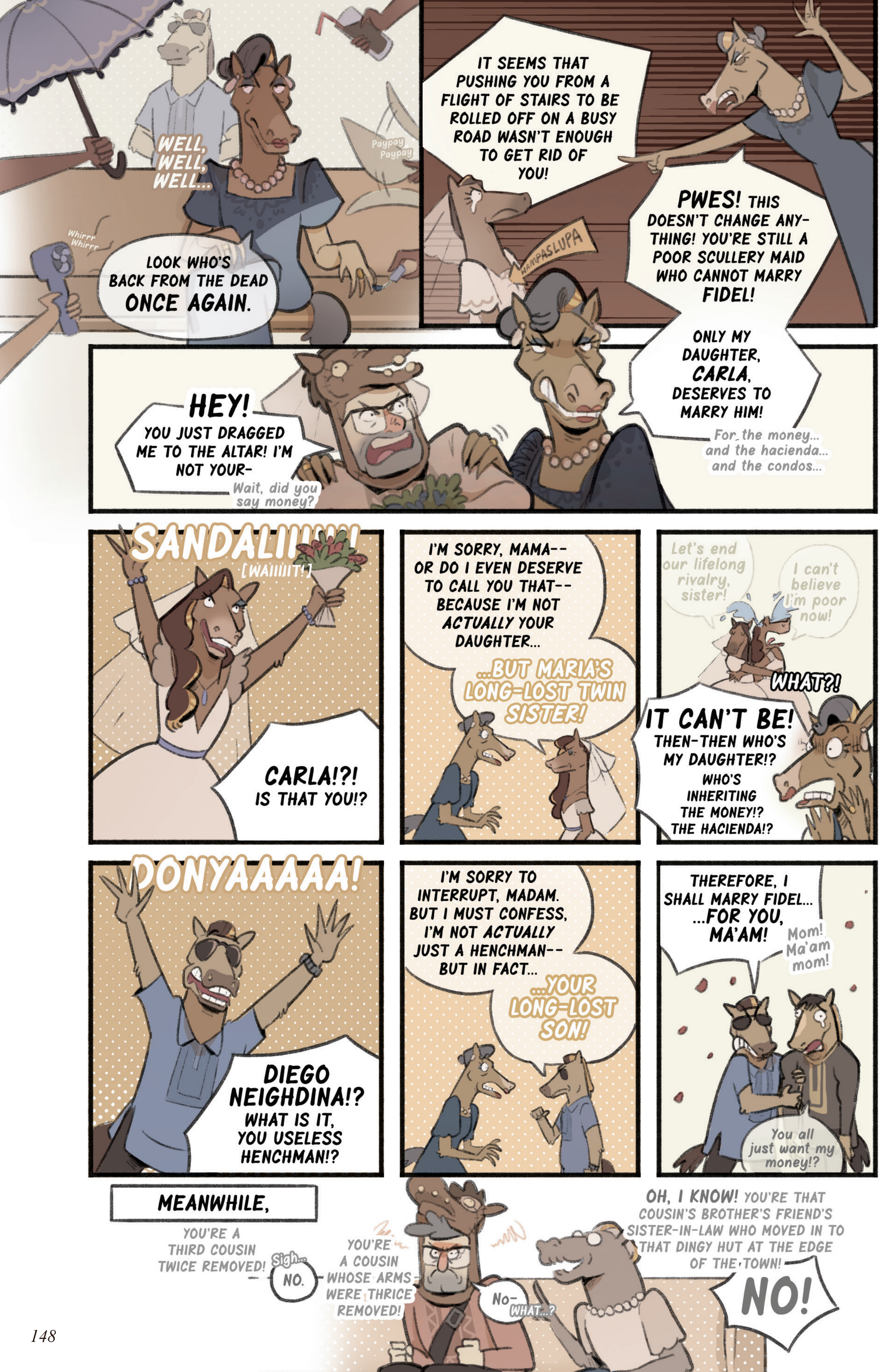
Around her, the currents moved in slow spirals, stirred by memory and tradition. She remembered the noise, the lights, the humans who called her by name.

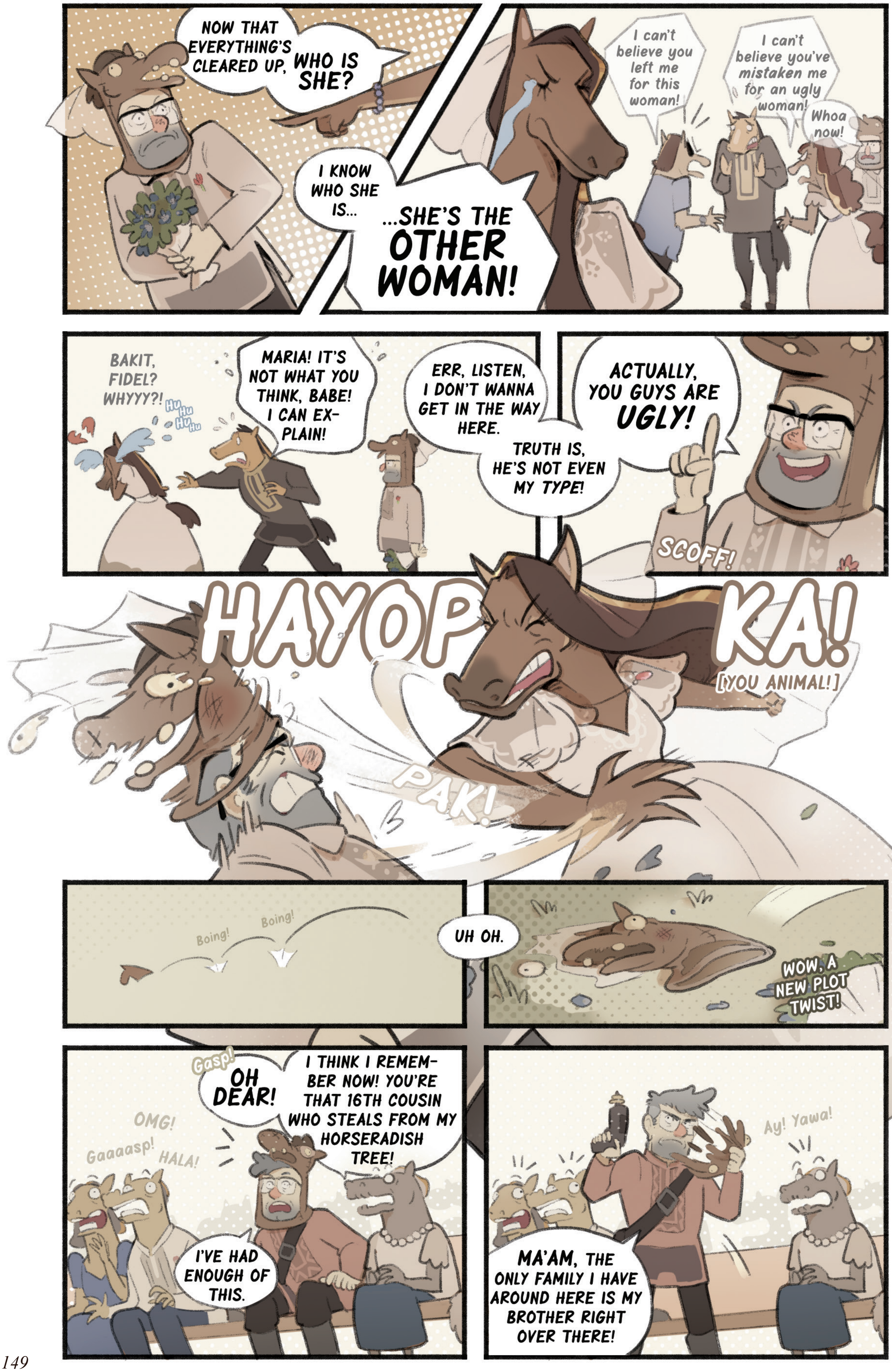
And in the stillness of the sea, her long, spectral body curved around a pearl shaped stone, ancient, glowing faintly like the sliver of a moon yet to rise.

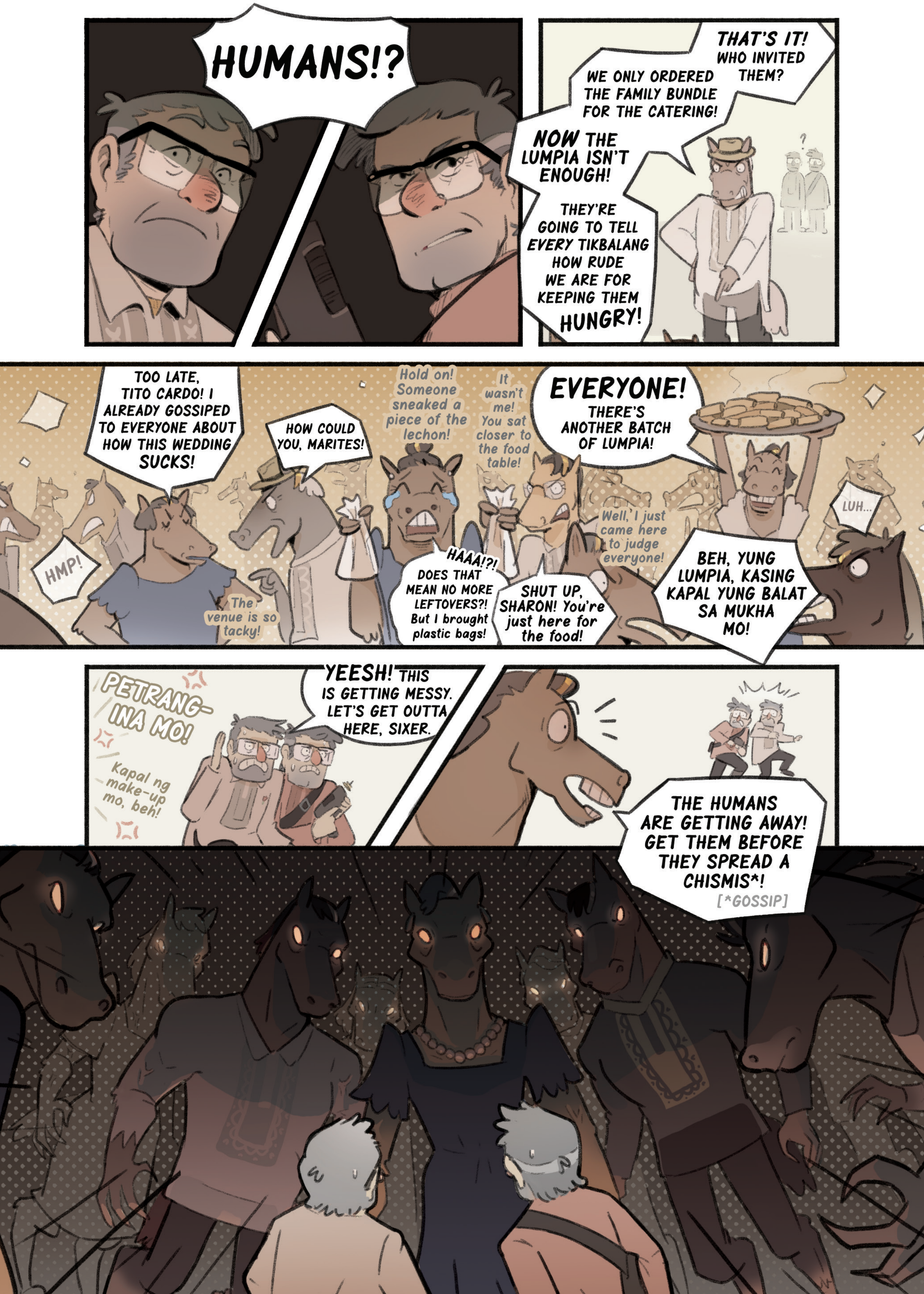

WHAT A BEAUTIFUL DAY FOR A WEDDING!
WHAT AN AWFUL DAY FOR A WEDDING!
UGH!
I DON'T SEE WHAT'S SO NICE ABOUT GETTING SOAKED WITH RAIN AND SWEAT!
AT LEAST THIS SHIRT IS BREEZIER THAN THAT SWEATER OF YOURS, EH, POINDEXTER?
Scribble Scribble
Scratch Scratch
I STILL DON'T SEE WHY IT'S NECESSARY FOR A DISGUISE, STANLEY.
Why would you marry him instead of me, Jessica!?
You should've crashed this wedding in style!
HEY, YOU WANNA STUDY 'EM UP CLOSE, THIS IS OUR TICKET IN WITHOUT GETTING TRAMPLED FOR MESSING WITH SOMEONE'S MARRIAGE.
Trust me, I've been there!
WELL... YOU'RE RIGHT.
YOU KNOW, I AM THIS CLOSE TO FINISHING UP MY RESEARCH ABOUT TIKBALANG.
I KNOW LOCALS WARNED US ABOUT THESE MISCHIEVOUS CREATURES, BUT I MUST KNOW WHAT THESE GOLDEN STRANDS CONTAIN IF WE PLUCK THEM.
Tikbalang
LOST!
TRICKSTER!
GOLDEN MANE
USES:
?
I KNOW WHAT IT'S FOR. GOLD, RIGHT? EASY! MAKING US RICH!
Who knows? It might come in handy for our travels.
Although, I'm just not particularly eager to mingle with people...
They're horses, Ford.
Half-people.
Aaand half-horses! How hard can it be? We just walk in, tell 'em we're relatives, and they'll believe it!
TAKE IT FROM SOMEONE WHO'S BEEN HIDING UNDER FALSE IDENTITIES FOR 30 YEARS!

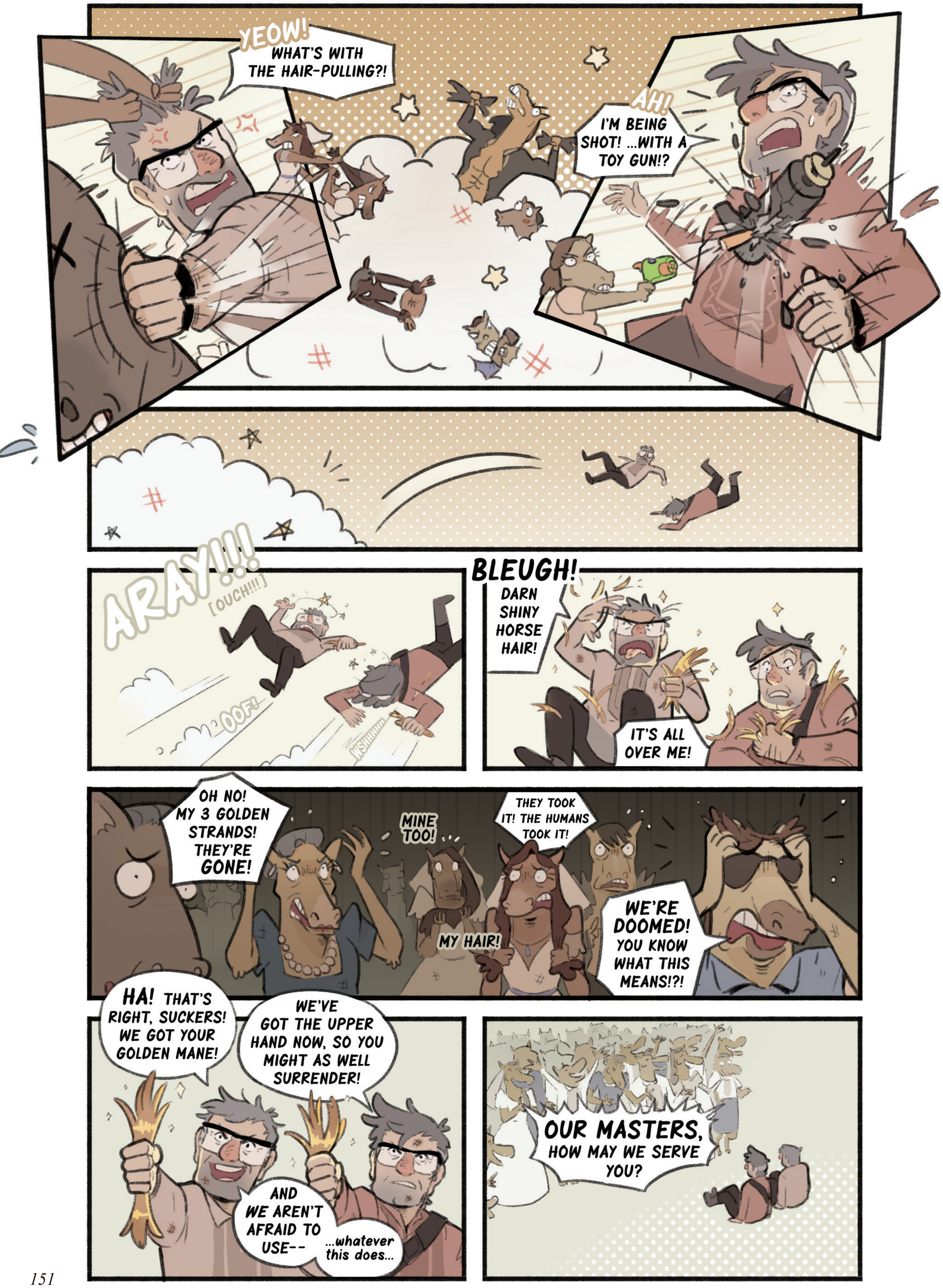

Uy, kamusta?
Wow, ang taba mo na!
Syempre, ganito, 'ganon!
Picture tayo! Remembrance.
Dzaii, 'wag! Pangit ng kuha mo!
Anak, behave ha!
May ano?
Chika! Chika!
Chika! Chika!
Daldal Daldal
DON'T WORRY, I'VE BEEN TO A COLOMBIAN PRISON BEFORE. I KNOW HOW TO SPEAK SPANISH.
THEY DON'T-
Ha? Ansabi?
?
HEEEY, ¡CÓMO ESTÁ!
LOOK, NO NEED TO CHECK THE GUEST LIST. WITH THESE DASHING LOOKS, YOU OBVIOUSLY KNOW WHO WE ARE.
THAT'S MY NERDY BROTHER, STANHORSE, AND I'M-
THE BRIDE!
SUSMARYOSEP!
WE'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR YOU!
THE WEDDING IS ABOUT TO START!
THE HORSE BRIDE
BY AZEHEARTS
STARRING:
???
FORD PINES
AND STAN PINES
WAIT, WHAT?

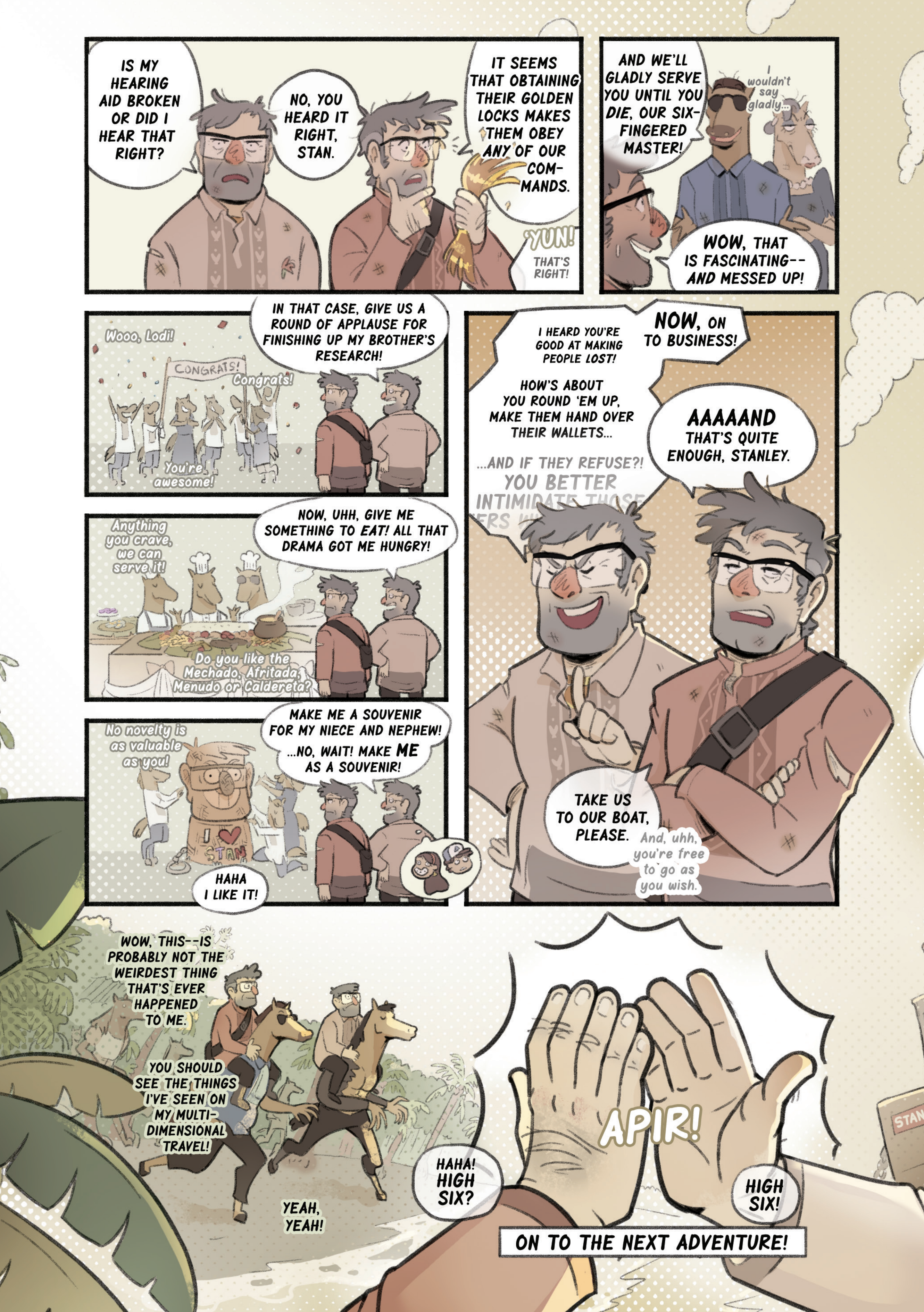

Stanley.
Over here!
?
Stanley!!!
OH, YOU CAN SIT HERE! DON'T BE SHY!
...UY, WHICH SIDE OF THE FAMILY ARE YOU AGAIN?
YOINK!
DO YOU TAKE THIS HORSE TO BE YOUR LAWFULLY WEDDED HORSE?
Sob Sob
I DO.
AND YOU, IHA?
UHH-
ITIGIL ANG KASAAAL!
[STOP THE WEDDIIING!]
GAAASP!
THE REAL BRIDE!
IT'S MARIA CELYN AGUAS!
RIP
CONDOLENCE
MARIA!
I THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAD! FROM A TERRIBLE CAR ACCIDENT, BY SLIPPING ON MULTIPLE FLIGHTS OF STAIRS!
ONLY IT WASN'T ACTUALLY AN ACCIDENT, FIDEL.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
WHY DON'T YOU ASK YOUR MOTHER-IN-LAW!
DONYA LAVINA DE SARGUELAS!
DUN DUN DUUUN!
WHA-WHAT'S GOING ON? WHY IS THIS TURNING INTO SOME KIND OF SOAP OPERA?

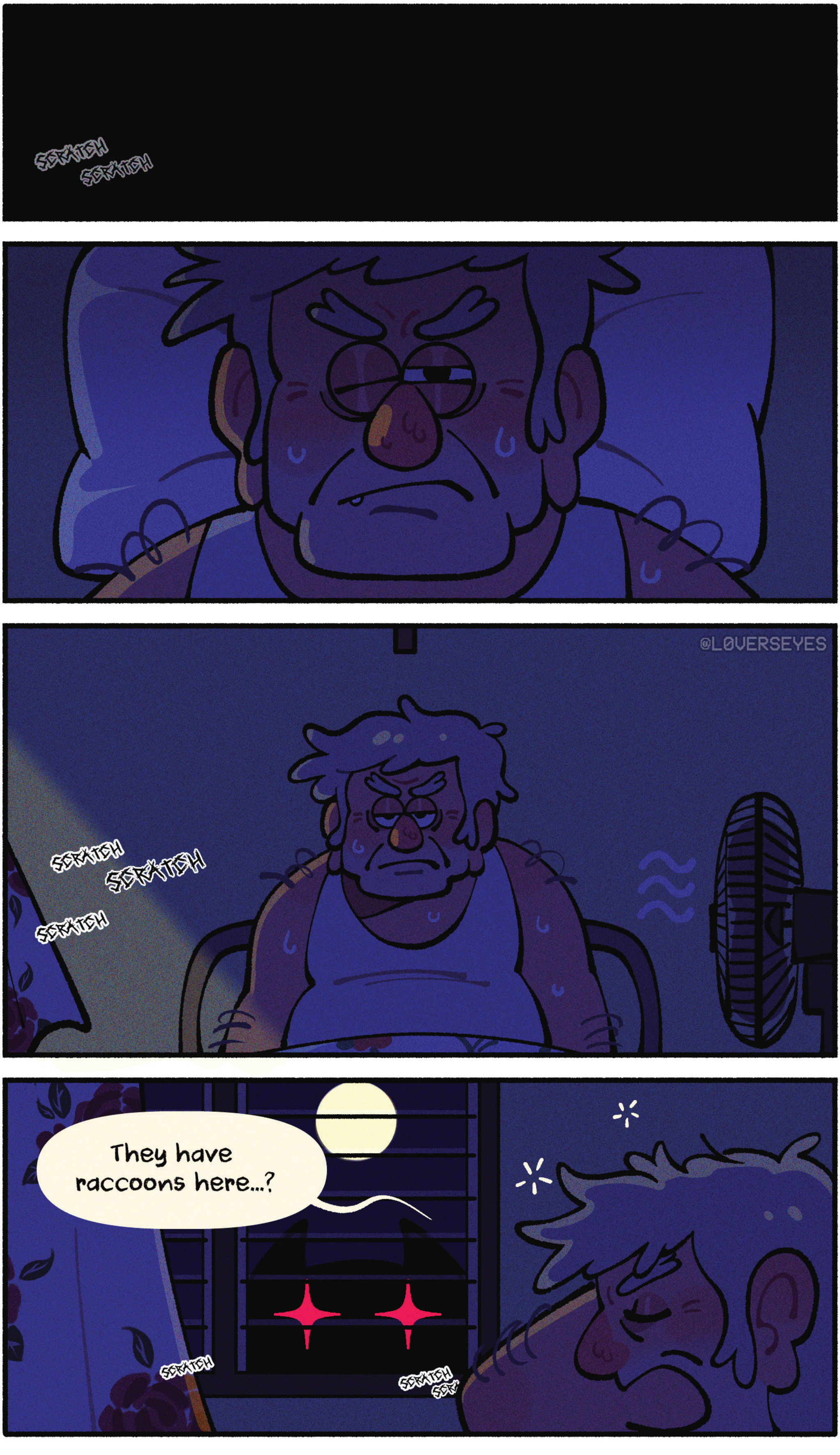

WELL, WELL, WELL...
Paypay Paypay
Whirrr Whirrr
LOOK WHO'S BACK FROM THE DEAD ONCE AGAIN.
IT SEEMS THAT PUSHING YOU FROM A FLIGHT OF STAIRS TO BE ROLLED OFF ON A BUSY ROAD WASN'T ENOUGH TO GET RID OF YOU!
HAMPASLUPA
PWES! THIS DOESN'T CHANGE ANY-THING! YOU'RE STILL A POOR SCULLERY MAID WHO CANNOT MARRY FIDEL!
HEY! YOU JUST DRAGGED ME TO THE ALTAR! I'M NOT YOUR-
Wait, did you say money?
ONLY MY DAUGHTER, CARLA, DESERVES TO MARRY HIM!
For the money... and the hacienda... and the condos...
SANDALIIIIII! [WAIIIIIT!]
CARLA!?! IS THAT YOU!?
I'M SORRY, MAMA-- OR DO I EVEN DESERVE TO CALL YOU THAT-- BECAUSE I'M NOT ACTUALLY YOUR DAUGHTER...
...BUT MARIA'S LONG-LOST TWIN SISTER!
Let's end our lifelong rivalry, sister!
I can't believe I'm poor now!
WHAT?!
IT CAN'T BE! THEN-THEN WHO'S MY DAUGHTER!? WHO'S INHERITING THE MONEY!? THE HACIENDA!?
DONYAAAAAA!
DIEGO NEIGHDINA!? WHAT IS IT, YOU USELESS HENCHMAN!?
I'M SORRY TO INTERRUPT, MADAM. BUT I MUST CONFESS, I'M NOT ACTUALLY JUST A HENCHMAN-- BUT IN FACT...
...YOUR LONG-LOST SON!
THEREFORE, I SHALL MARRY FIDEL... ...FOR YOU, MA'AM!
Mom! Ma'am mom!
You all just want my money!?
MEANWHILE,
YOU'RE A THIRD COUSIN TWICE REMOVED!
Sigh...
NO.
YOU'RE A COUSIN WHOSE ARMS WERE THRICE REMOVED!
No-
WHAT...?
OH, I KNOW! YOU'RE THAT COUSIN'S BROTHER'S FRIEND'S SISTER-IN-LAW WHO MOVED IN TO THAT DINGY HUT AT THE EDGE OF THE TOWN!
NO!

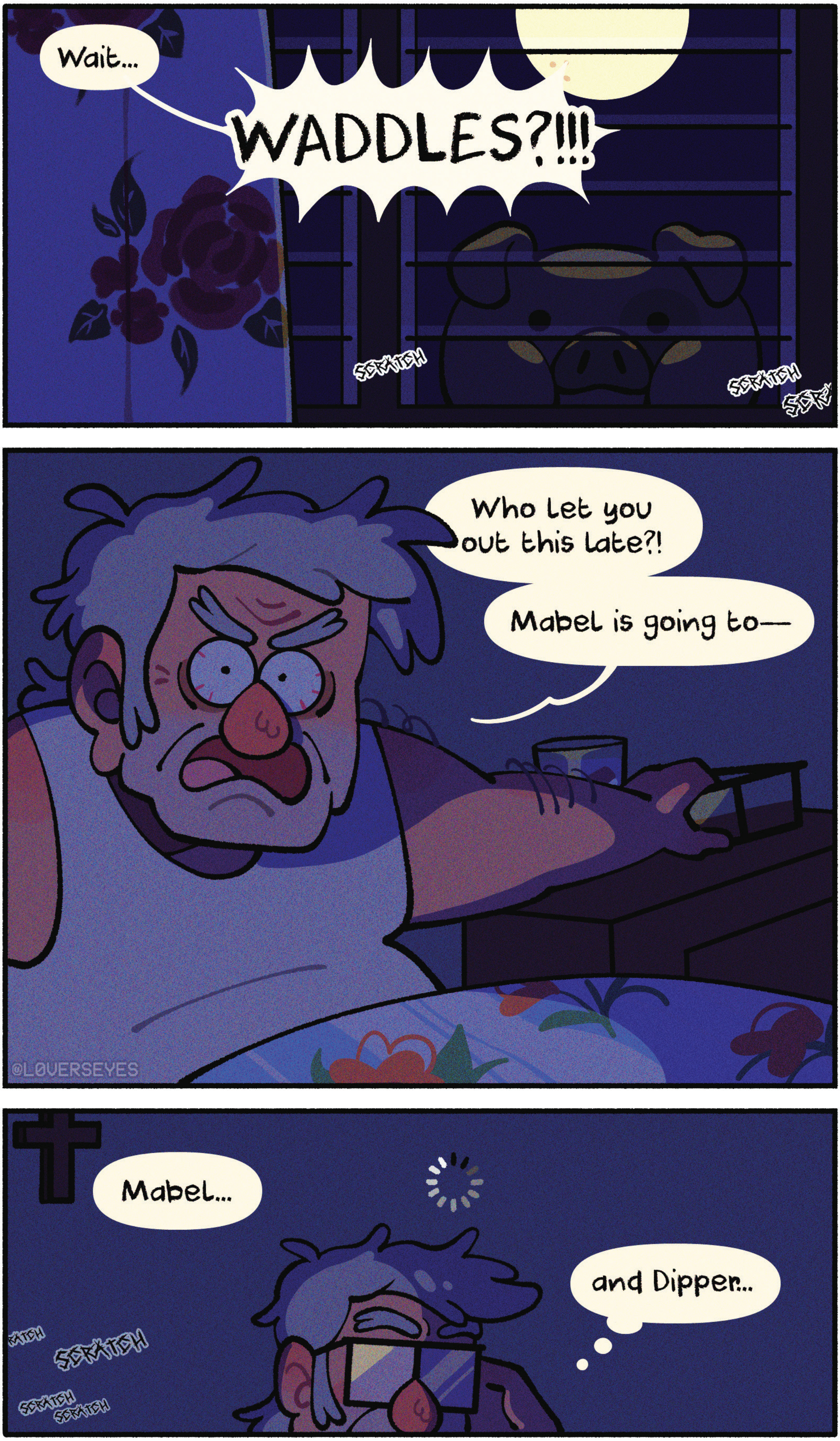

NOW THAT EVERYTHING'S CLEARED UP, WHO IS SHE?
I can't believe you left me for this woman!
I can't believe you've mistaken me for an ugly woman!
Whoa now!
I KNOW WHO SHE IS...
...SHE'S THE OTHER WOMAN!
BAKIT, FIDEL? WHYYY?!
Hu Hu Hu Hu
MARIA! IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK, BABE! I CAN EXPLAIN!
ERR, LISTEN, I DON'T WANNA GET IN THE WAY HERE.
TRUTH IS, HE'S NOT EVEN MY TYPE!
ACTUALLY, YOU GUYS ARE UGLY!
SCOFF!
HAYOP KA!
[YOU ANIMAL!]
PAK!
Boing!
Boing!
UH OH.
WOW, A NEW PLOT TWIST!
Gasp!
OH DEAR!
I THINK I REMEMBER NOW! YOU'RE THAT 16TH COUSIN WHO STEALS FROM MY HORSERADISH TREE!
OMG!
Gaaaasp!
HALA!
I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF THIS.
Ay! Yawa!
MA'AM, THE ONLY FAMILY I HAVE AROUND HERE IS MY BROTHER RIGHT OVER THERE!

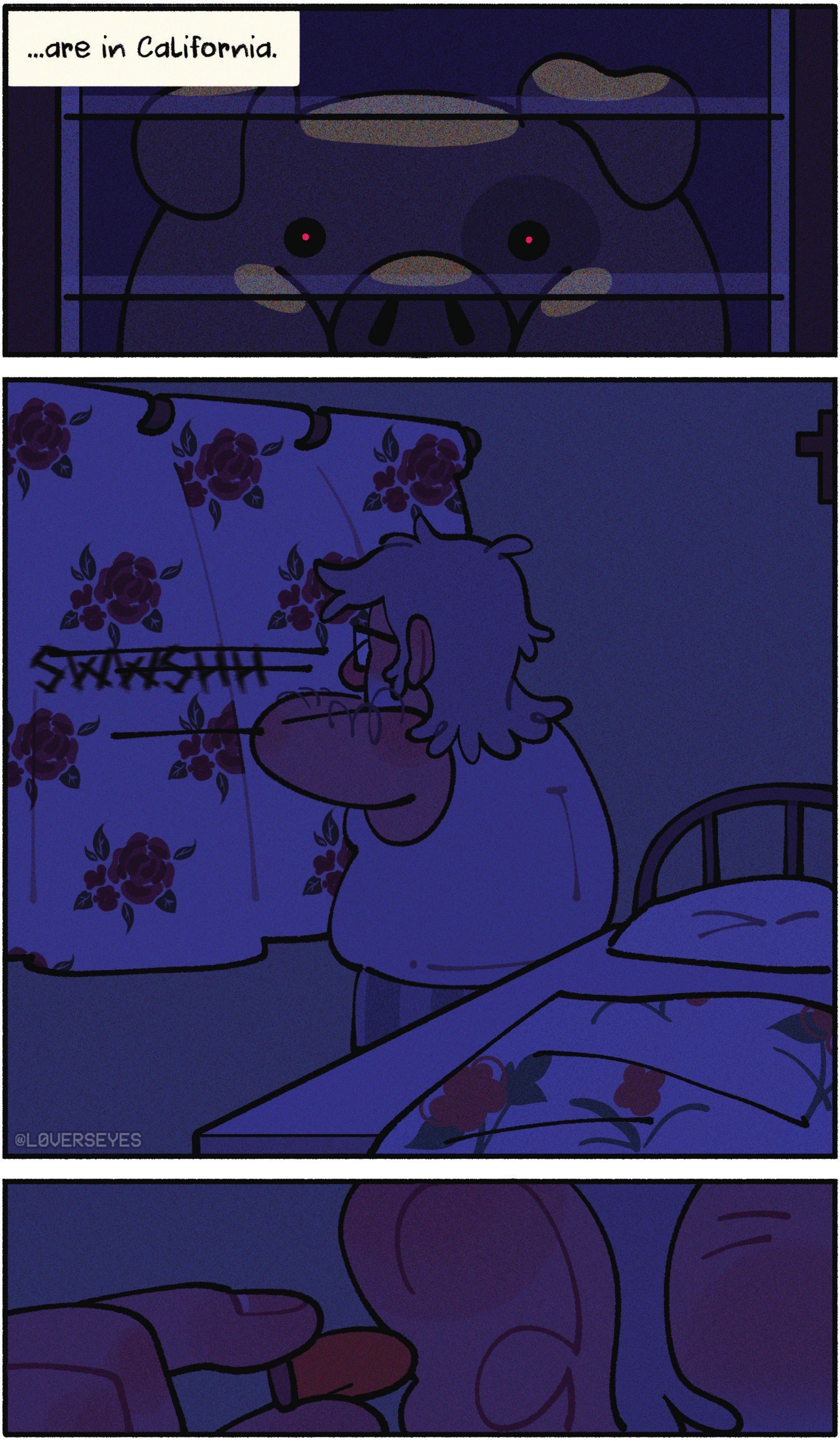

HUMANS!?
THAT'S IT! WHO INVITED THEM?
WE ONLY ORDERED THE FAMILY BUNDLE FOR THE CATERING!
NOW THE LUMPIA ISN'T ENOUGH!
THEY'RE GOING TO TELL EVERY TIKBALANG HOW RUDE WE ARE FOR KEEPING THEM HUNGRY!
?
TOO LATE, TITO CARDO! I ALREADY GOSSIPED TO EVERYONE ABOUT HOW THIS WEDDING SUCKS!
HOW COULD YOU, MARITES!
Hold on! Someone sneaked a piece of the lechon!
It wasn't me! You sat closer to the food table!
EVERYONE! THERE'S ANOTHER BATCH OF LUMPIA!
LUH...
HMP!
The venue is so tacky!
HAAA!?! DOES THAT MEAN NO MORE LEFTOVERS?! But I brought plastic bags!
Well, I just came here to judge everyone!
SHUT UP, SHARON! You're just here for the food!
BEH, YUNG LUMPIA, KASING KAPAL YUNG BALAT SA MUKHA MO!
PETRANG-INA MO!
Kapal ng make-up mo, beh!
YEESH! THIS IS GETTING MESSY. LET'S GET OUTTA HERE, SIXER.
THE HUMANS ARE GETTING AWAY! GET THEM BEFORE THEY SPREAD A CHISMIS*!
[*GOSSIP]

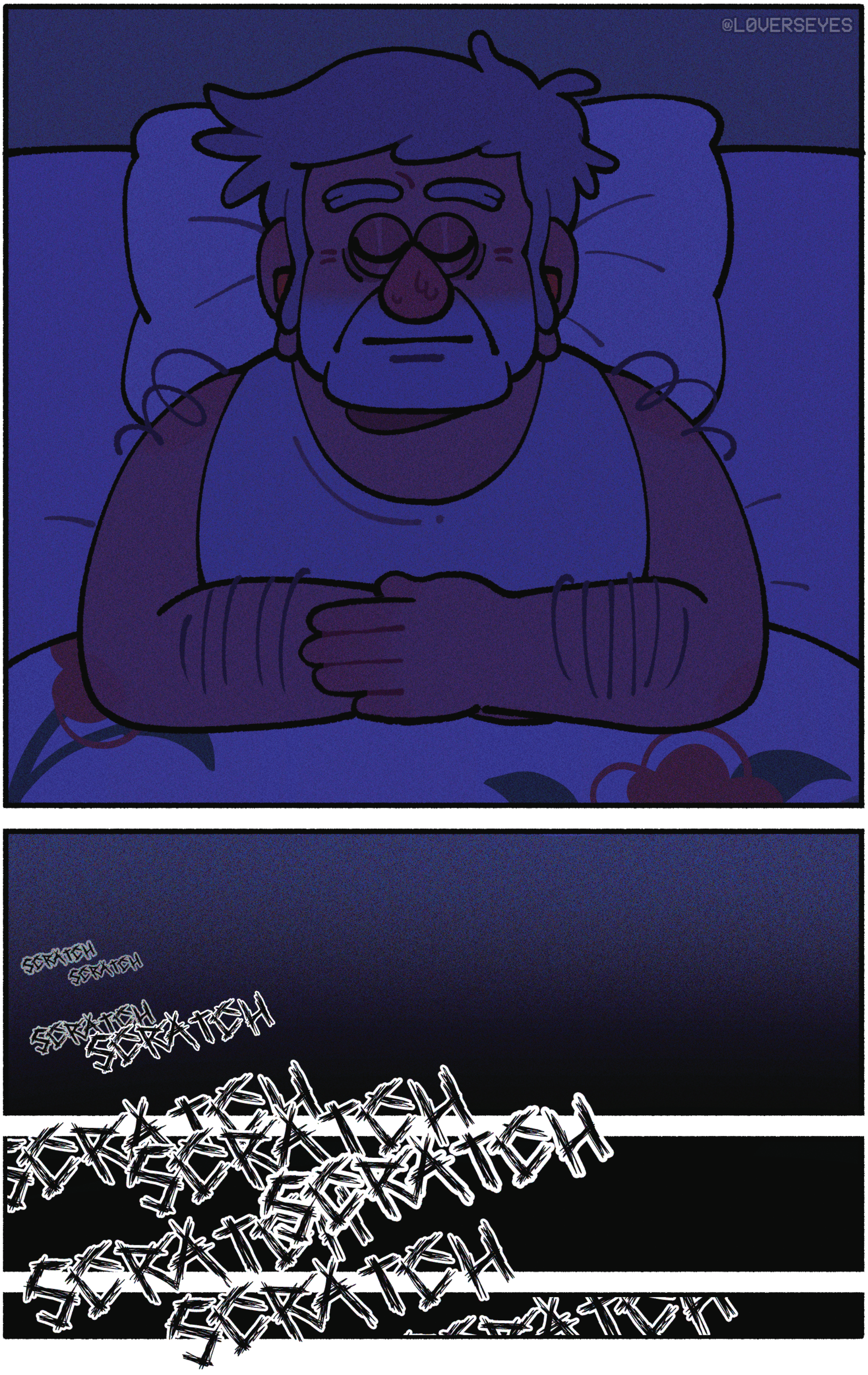

YEOW!
WHAT'S WITH THE HAIR-PULLING?!
AH!
I'M BEING SHOT! ...WITH A TOY GUN!?
ARAY!!!
[OUCH!!!]
OOF!
WSHHHHH
BLEUGH!
DARN SHINY HORSE HAIR!
IT'S ALL OVER ME!
OH NO! MY 3 GOLDEN STRANDS! THEY'RE GONE!
MINE TOO!
THEY TOOK IT! THE HUMANS TOOK IT!
MY HAIR!
WE'RE DOOMED! YOU KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS!?!
HA! THAT'S RIGHT, SUCKERS! WE GOT YOUR GOLDEN MANE!
WE'VE GOT THE UPPER HAND NOW, SO YOU MIGHT AS WELL SURRENDER!
AND WE AREN'T AFRAID TO USE--
...whatever this does...
OUR MASTERS, HOW MAY WE SERVE YOU?


IS MY HEARING AID BROKEN OR DID I HEAR THAT RIGHT?
NO, YOU HEARD IT RIGHT, STAN.
IT SEEMS THAT OBTAINING THEIR GOLDEN LOCKS MAKES THEM OBEY ANY OF OUR COMMANDS.
'YUN! THAT'S RIGHT!
AND WE'LL GLADLY SERVE YOU UNTIL YOU DIE, OUR SIX-FINGERED MASTER!
I wouldn't say gladly...
WOW, THAT IS FASCINATING-- AND MESSED UP!
IN THAT CASE, GIVE US A ROUND OF APPLAUSE FOR FINISHING UP MY BROTHER'S RESEARCH!
Wooo, Lodi!
CONGRATS!
Congrats!
You're awesome!
NOW, UHH, GIVE ME SOMETHING TO EAT! ALL THAT DRAMA GOT ME HUNGRY!
Anything you crave, we can serve it!
Do you like the Mechado, Afritada, Menudo or Caldereta?
MAKE ME A SOUVENIR FOR MY NIECE AND NEPHEW! ...NO, WAIT! MAKE ME AS A SOUVENIR!
No novelty is as valuable as you!
I ♥ STAN
HAHA I LIKE IT!
NOW, ON TO BUSINESS!
I HEARD YOU'RE GOOD AT MAKING PEOPLE LOST!
HOW'S ABOUT YOU ROUND 'EM UP, MAKE THEM HAND OVER THEIR WALLETS...
...AND IF THEY REFUSE?! YOU BETTER INTIMIDATE THOSE
AAAAAND THAT'S QUITE ENOUGH, STANLEY.
TAKE US TO OUR BOAT, PLEASE.
And, uhh, you're free to go as you wish.
WOW, THIS--IS PROBABLY NOT THE WEIRDEST THING THAT'S EVER HAPPENED TO ME.
YOU SHOULD SEE THE THINGS I'VE SEEN ON MY MULTI-DIMENSIONAL TRAVEL!
YEAH, YEAH!
HAHA! HIGH SIX?
APIR!
HIGH SIX!
ON TO THE NEXT ADVENTURE!


SCRATCH
SCRATCH
@L0VERSEYES
SCRATCH
SCRATCH
SCRATCH
They have raccoons here...?
SCRATCH
SCRATCH
SCR

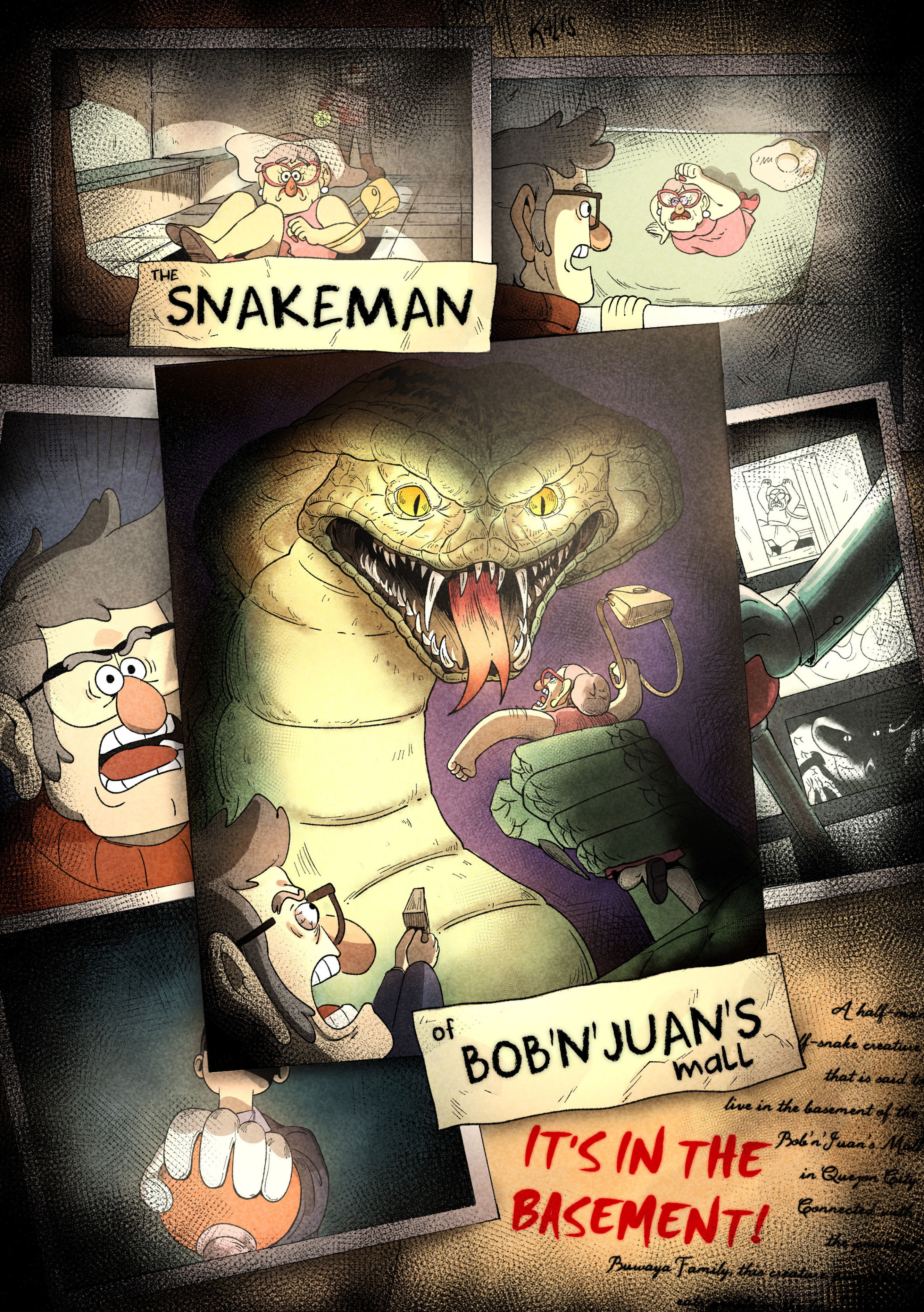

Wait...
WADDLES?!!!
SCRATCH
SCRATCH
SCR
Who let you out this late?!
Mabel is going to—
@LOVERSEYES
Mabel...
and Dipper..
ATCH
SCRATCH
SCRATCH
SCRATCH

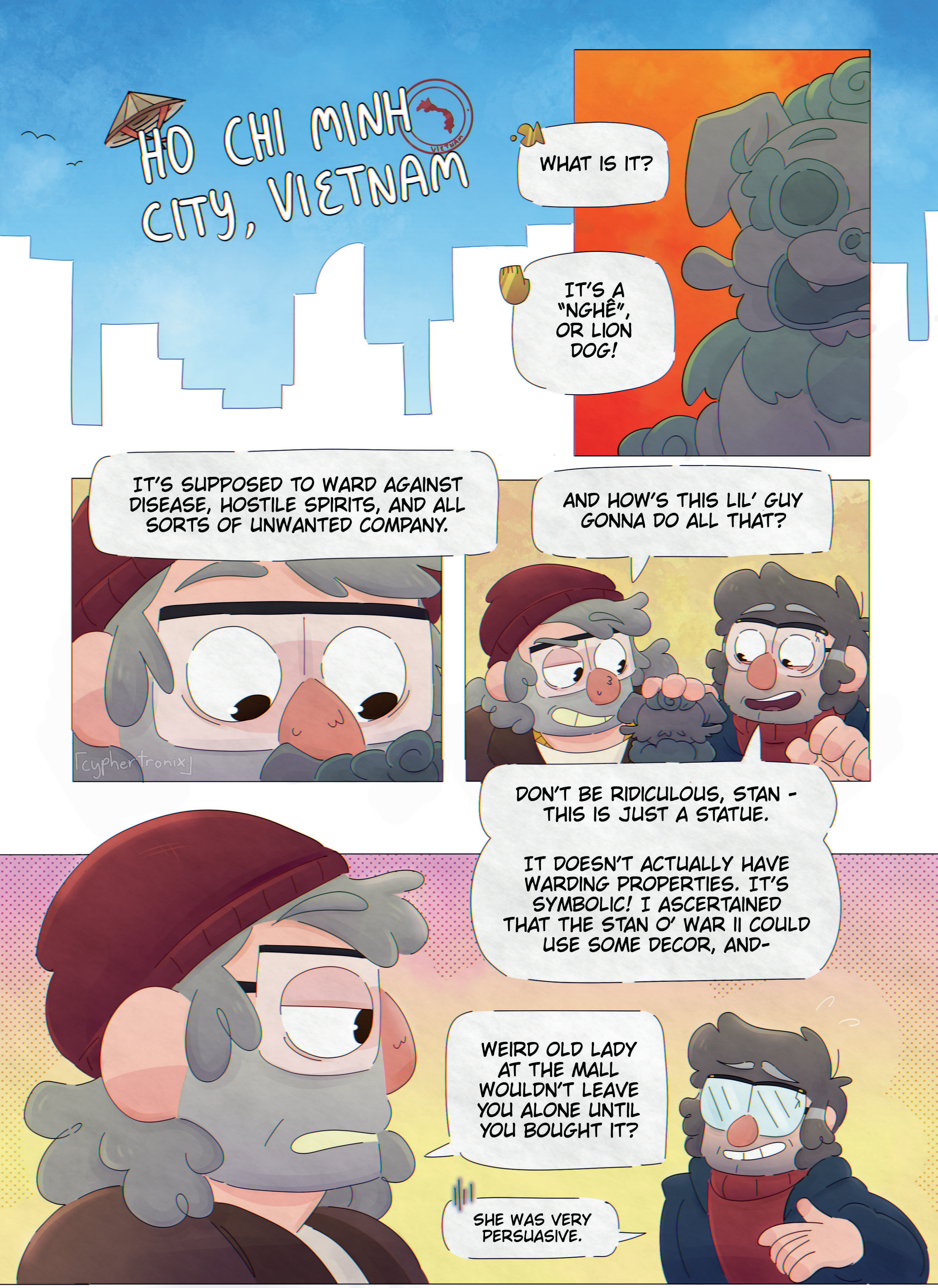

...are in California.
SWISHH
@L0VERSEYES

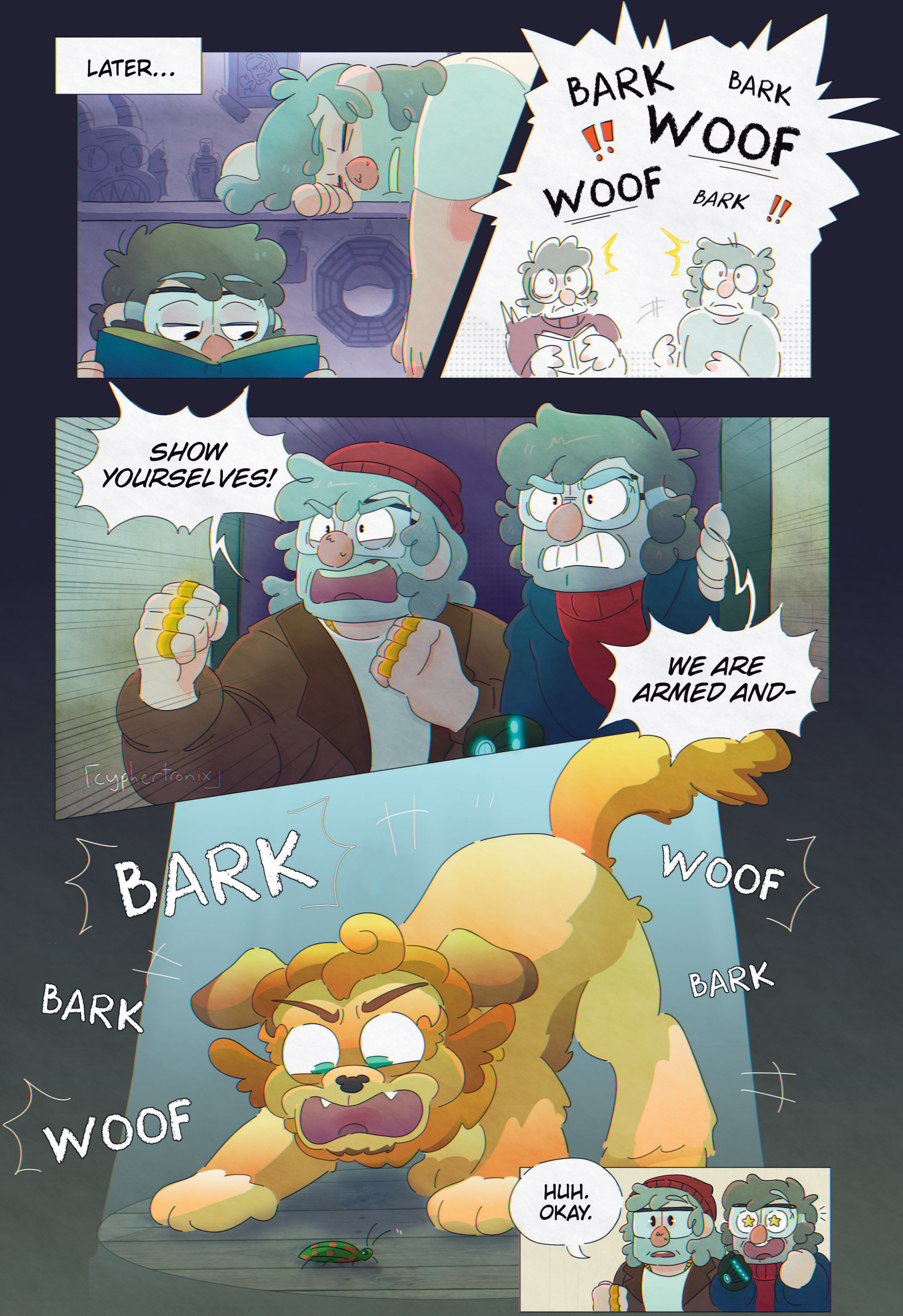

@L0VERSEYES
SCRATCH SCRATCH
SCRATCH SCRATCH
SCRATCH SCRATCH SCRATCH
SCRATCH SCRATCH SCRATCH
SCRATCH

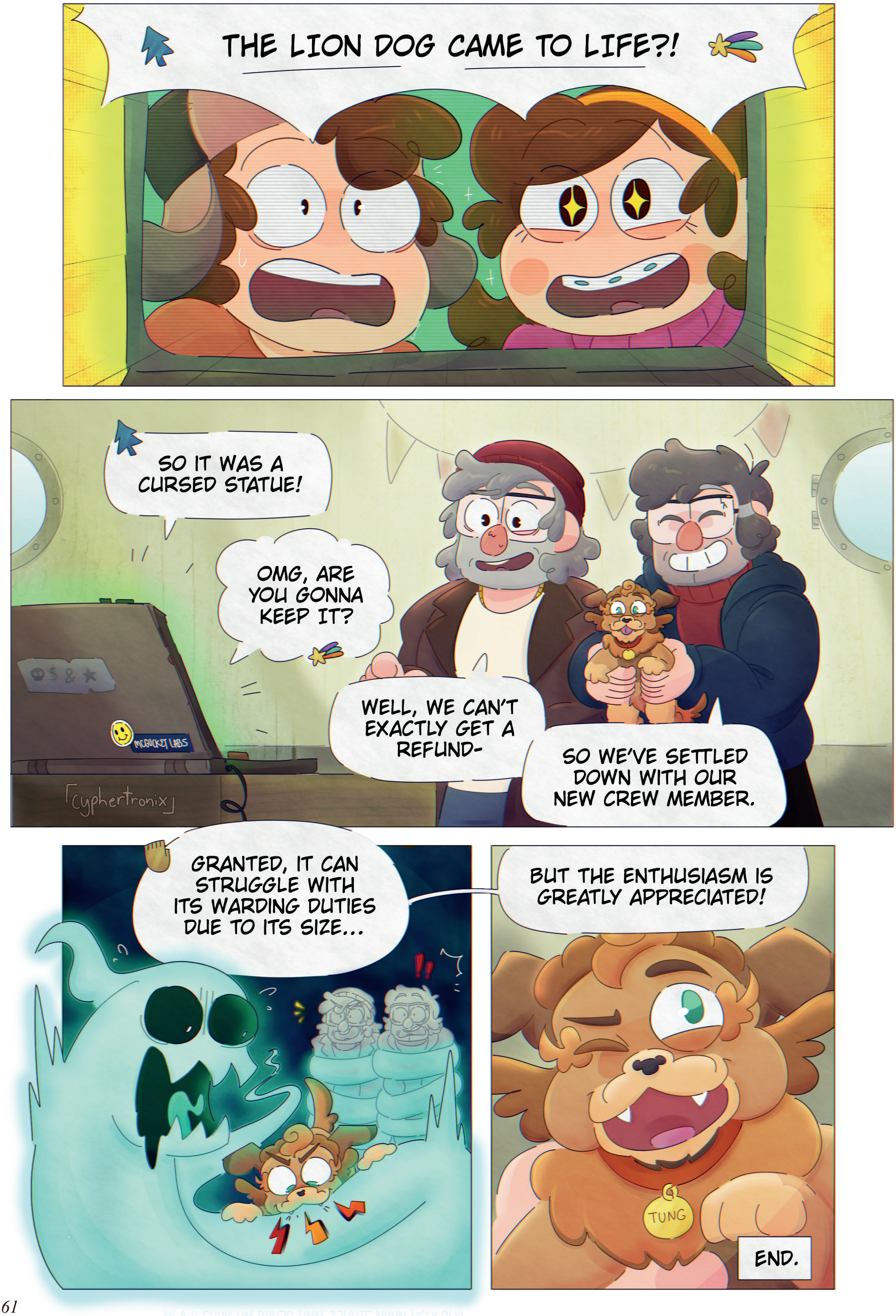
END.

RAM AVERA

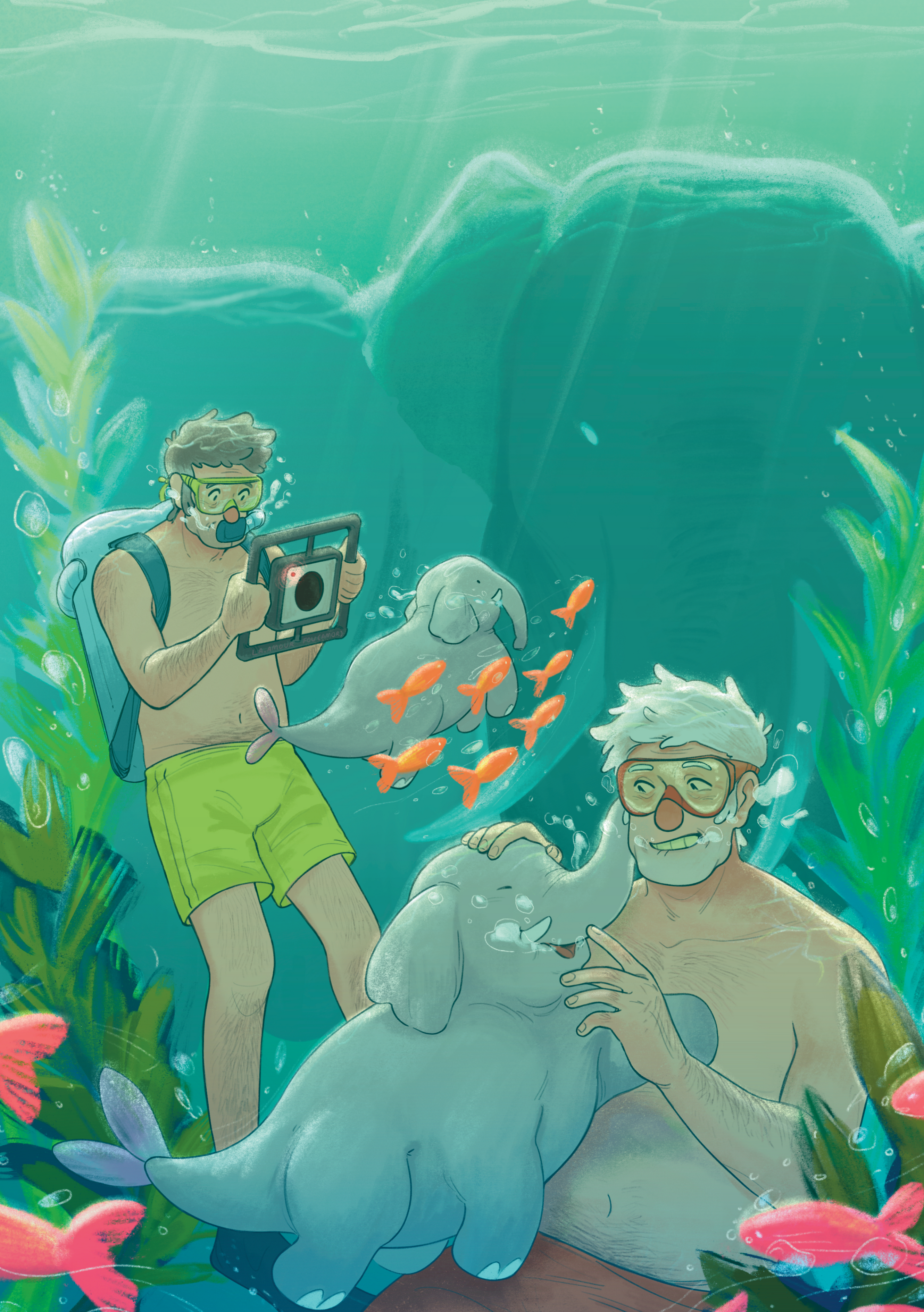

THE SNAKEMAN
of BOB'N'JUAN'S mall
IT'S IN THE BASEMENT!
A half-ma
f-snake creature
that is said t
live in the basement of the
Bob'n'Juan's Mal
in Quezon City
Connected with
the
Buwaya Family, this creature


HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM
VIETNAM
WHAT IS IT?
IT'S A "NGHÊ", OR LION DOG!
IT'S SUPPOSED TO WARD AGAINST DISEASE, HOSTILE SPIRITS, AND ALL SORTS OF UNWANTED COMPANY.
cyphertronix
AND HOW'S THIS LIL' GUY GONNA DO ALL THAT?
DON'T BE RIDICULOUS, STAN - THIS IS JUST A STATUE.
IT DOESN'T ACTUALLY HAVE WARDING PROPERTIES. IT'S SYMBOLIC! I ASCERTAINED THAT THE STAN O' WAR II COULD USE SOME DECOR, AND-
WEIRD OLD LADY AT THE MALL WOULDN'T LEAVE YOU ALONE UNTIL YOU BOUGHT IT?
SHE WAS VERY PERSUASIVE.


LATER...
BARK
BARK
!!
WOOF
WOOF
BARK
!!
SHOW YOURSELVES!
WE ARE ARMED AND-
[cyphertronix]
BARK
WOOF
BARK
BARK
WOOF
HUH. OKAY.


THE LION DOG CAME TO LIFE?!
SO IT WAS A CURSED STATUE!
OMG, ARE YOU GONNA KEEP IT?
McGUCKET LABS
⌈cyphertronix⌋
WELL, WE CAN'T EXACTLY GET A REFUND-
SO WE'VE SETTLED DOWN WITH OUR NEW CREW MEMBER.
GRANTED, IT CAN STRUGGLE WITH ITS WARDING DUTIES DUE TO ITS SIZE...
BUT THE ENTHUSIASM IS GREATLY APPRECIATED!
TUNG
END.

NLA H SVHK VM RUVJR VMM ZJVVIF NHUN VCLY OLYL


LA.AMOUR FOU (AMOR)

Memory Log 3

Author: Tinglecannon

Trigger warnings: *swearing, allusions to suicide*

Watching Bakunawa (? think that's how it's spelled) almost eat the moon really put some stuff into perspective, huh, Ford?

Like how little time there is left...

Sure would be *NICE* to ignore the eye burning and headaches and this *STUPID FUCKING SONG IN MY HEAD* as easily as I could that fake Waddles.

And Ford looks at me like I'm gonna disappear any damn second. Or attack him. Or... I don't fucking know! He's walking on eggshells and it pisses me off how much he's acting like he did as a kid around ~~da~~ that piece of shit.

Your dumb new code ramblings are getting longer.

"Always a step ahead of me"? You're such a smug prick.

"Always a step ahead of me", says the guy with the worst Spanish accent I've ever heard.

You think I couldn't tell something's fucking wrong?? Like I didn't ALSO live through the apocalypse? You and Shermie couldn't have more obvious tells if you tried. You're both awful liars, and the kids are out of the question, which is why *I'M* the best choice to beat this damn freak.

And I'm going to fucking figure something out.

No matter what it takes. No matter what it COSTS, Ford.

! $#▲$&? ⚛✎$ ▲✎$★×# ▲$&★?💀×&☽$ #⚡ **$🌪× × $#

At least that horse wedding was kinda fun. Always good to have a distraction every once in a while.

HA, YEAH, I REALLY LIKED THE PART WHERE HER HENCHMAN WAS GAY.

... ...guess I fell asleep at some point.

It's really hard to look at you sometimes, Ford.

You're jumpy in the mornings, angry in the afternoons, and mopey in the evenings.

You can barely fake laugh along to my jokes during breakfast because you're too busy twitchin' like you *NEED* to go write your coded notes on my health that second.

Whenever I hum, you tense like you gotta draw your gun at once.

And watching the stars at night, knowing how many of them you must've gone to while waiting for me to take fuckin' *FOREVER* to *FINALLY* get you home...

I missed you.

I finally got you back and then lost you immediately. Some fucking brother I turned out to be, huh?

And yeah, I finally got you back again, and then you and the kids got *ME* back. And this is the trip of the lifetime! I wanted this for our entire lives, Ford, to just... have cool adventures with my best friend.

But I don't think this can go on. I can't risk all of your safeties like this anymore—you, the kids, Shermie's family, Soos's, Wendy's, Gravity Falls...fuck, the entire universe too...

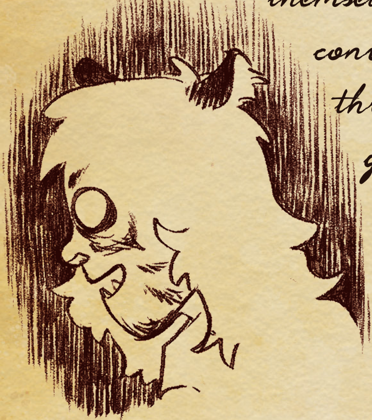
Sorry.

*?%$!?🗡

During our hike into one of Northeastern Thailand's national parks, our luck had taken a turn for the worse when our guide turned out not to be what he they seemed.

Stanley and I were told of some rumors about abnormal animal behavior from the locals. In the information I was able to gather, I realized that the occurrence had a high chance of being supernatural in nature, and I wanted to investigate further.

Stanley was able to find someone who promised to help us get into the deeper parts of the forest. They had introduced themselves as a park ranger, and after my brother convinced me it would be more trouble going through the bureaucracy actually required to get into the off-trail path, we took their help.



It turned out our guide was not human.

They are a

Sming

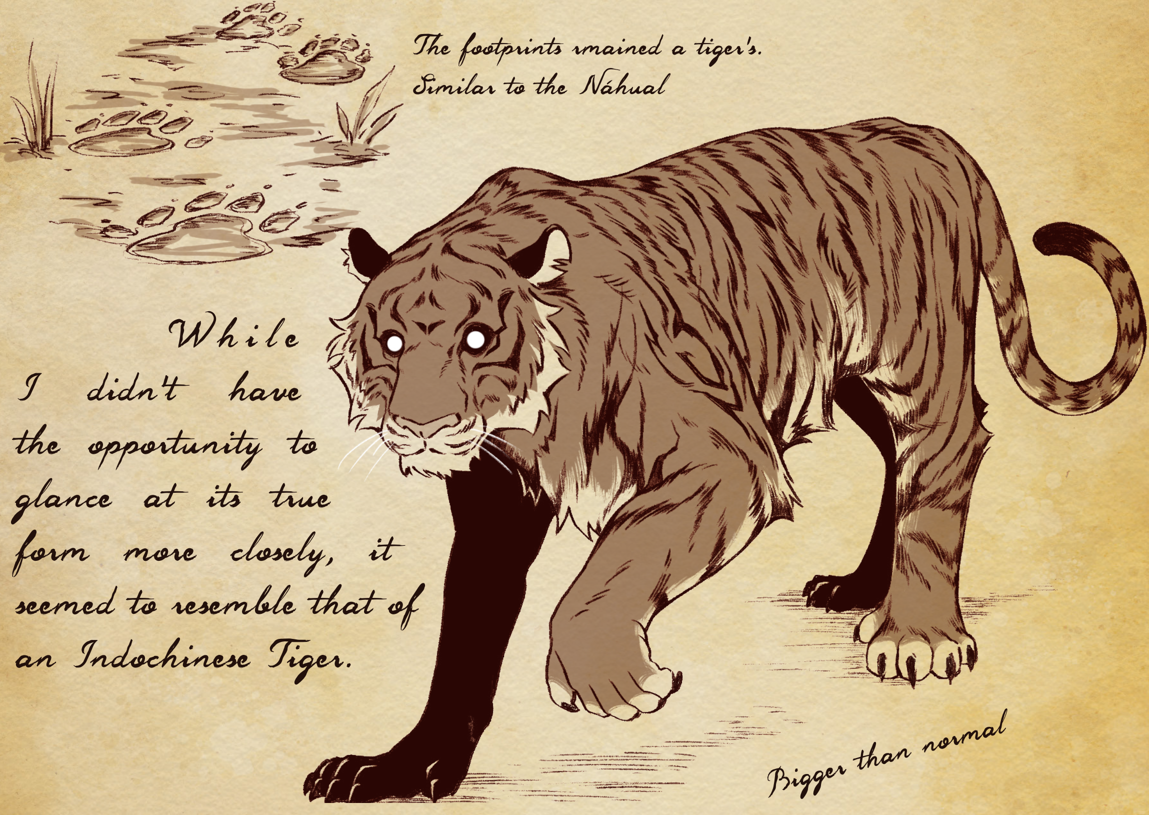
a man-eating tiger from the local folktale.

This one seemed to have wandered from their usual territory in a different part of the country.

Stan joked something about "the job crisis really is worldwide," and I reminded him that it was not a good time, as they were currently chasing and trying to kill us.

⚡⛵👓✖# ✖🌀??★ 🦴?⚓$!

The Sming had shape-shifting abilities. They seemed to be able to change to a different human form at will, as long as no one was looking. So far, aside from the park ranger we first encountered them as, we've also run into the forms of a woman and a lost child. Terrifyingly perfect mimicry, if not for the circumstances.


The footprints rmained a tiger's.
Similar to the Náhual

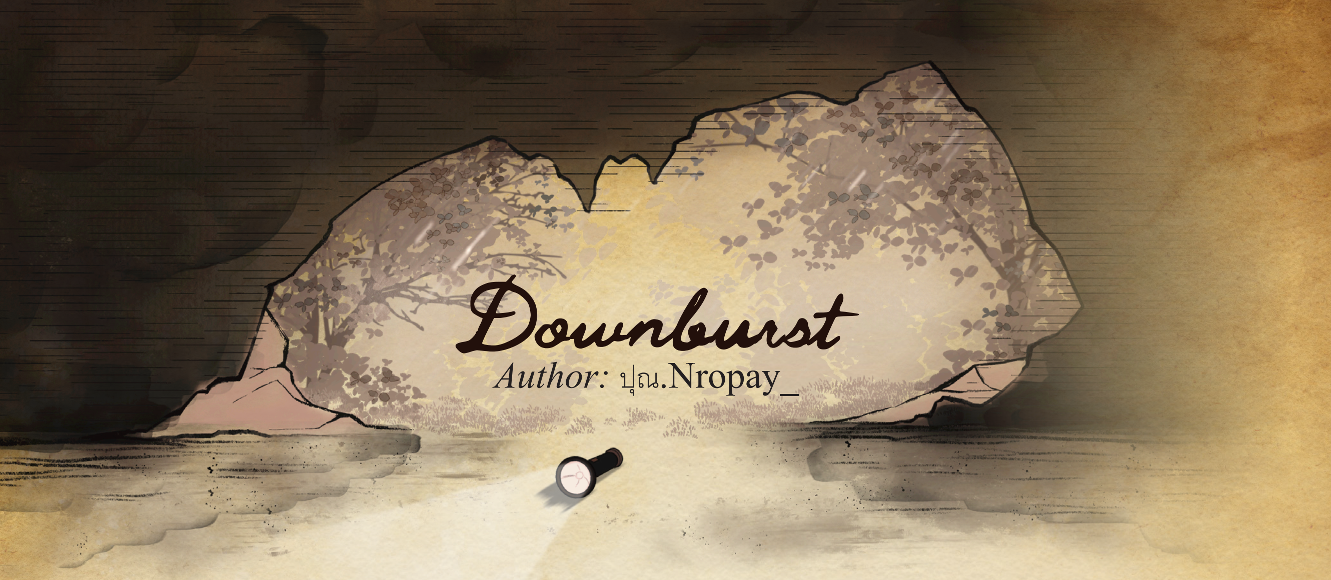
Bigger than normal

While I didn't have the opportunity to glance at its true form more closely, it seemed to resemble that of an Indochinese Tiger.

Stanley had found a cave for us to hide in while it started to rain. I can only hope the cologne my brother tossed at it will throw it off our scents enough to not be able to find us.

To my surprise, the cave seems to lead into a lost temple of some kind.

I intend to take a look while we wait for the rain to stop...



Downburst

Author: ปุณ.Nropay_

As he finished up penning his latest entry, Stanford Pines put away his journal. His attention shifted back to the situation at hand.

It was only just shy of the afternoon, but the rain and heavy clouds, combined with the shadow of the tree, had blocked out the normally bright sun of the tropical climate. The darkness in the cave was only cut through by the brothers' lantern and flashlight.

As far as the forest map Stanley had gotten before this hike told them, there wasn't supposed to be any temple this deep in the woods. Although Stanford traveled enough to learn that sometimes, things often got lost and forgotten by history.

Sometimes—as his hard learned lesson also told him—with a good reason.

Cautiously, from both the wet floor and concern of dangers lurking ahead, Ford continued his walk deeper into the cavern, aiming to join Stanley, who went on ahead while he recorded their recent encounter with the Sming.

The stone stairs were eroded by time and water damage, but held their shape enough to catch their attention, and proved it could be used to traverse down. Stanley jokingly theorized the mysterious entrance would lead to some sort of pirate treasure hiding spot, before Stanford had to remind him that they are extremely inland.

When he found Stanley, his brother was looking at the cave's wall.

As Ford approached, Stan pointed the flashlight directly at his brother's eyes, earning himself an annoyed glare for his behavior.

Ford tried to not think of it as a taunt. Something nagged at him that it was.

He wished the lantern's light wasn't yellow-tinted.

"Took you long enough. Guess what I found while you were writing," Stan said playfully, still holding the flashlight in front of Ford's face.

"Well, I hope it's not another murderous tiger," Ford mustered up a tired chuckle, hand pushing away the bright light from his face. "Cryptid or otherwise, it would be astoundingly bad luck on your part."

Stan rolled his eyes, fondly.

"Ha ha, very funny," was his deadpan answer. "Not another tiger, but I bet you'd still like this one."

With the flair of an expert tour guide of thirty years, Stan directed Ford's attention to the rocky wall of the cave.

"Too big to take back to the ship," Stanley said, a lighthearted tone in his voice. "So, you'd better start sketching if you wanna get all the details."

A *mural*, enormous artwork of a stone carved. It portrayed a storytelling element, featuring a deity of some kind with a serpentine body. Depicted in it… a prayer, a rain, a celebration.

And in the middle section of the wall—where the story revolved around it—a giant carving of a horned snake.

Ford, intrigued, moved in to take a closer look with his lantern. He was about to reach out and touch the carved stone… before stopping himself and pulling out his journal instead.

"Interesting, the snake-like body suggests a similar type of creature to the *Bakunawa* and the *Lawu*. However, the accessories seem to indicate a station, like the *Lembuswana* with the guardian role…"

Promptly ignoring a cough and a disguised *"nerd"* mumbled from his less academically inclined twin, Stanford set down his lantern before starting to take notes and sketching the carving upon the stone.

After a few minutes passed with just the sound of pencil sketching on paper, Stanley thought about leaving his brother to it. He considered for a moment about bringing out his own notebook to draw something, maybe some dumb doodles of him wrestling the tiger to send to the kids.

Anything to get his mind off the problem looming over them.

But before he could find a better spot to sit down, Ford suddenly called out to him.

"Stanley! Come take a look at this!" He pointed to the base of the wall with his pen, voice excited.

The light of the lantern faintly illuminated it. The general area looked vaguely like a string of writing. Although, with his bad eyesight, Stanley couldn't tell what it was about from where he was standing.

The debate between boredom and curiosity was unsurprisingly short, and so he moved to take a look.

"Urgh, couldn't you find something cool that's more at eye level?" Stan grumbled as he sat down beside his brother, grabbing onto his shoulder as an anchor.

The floor was freezing cold, Stanley noticed when his other hand touched it. He didn't know how Ford could just sit on it without any complaint.

And before Ford could go on a long monologue about "*real interesting things cannot be found in conventional places*" or something along those lines, Stan continued his complaint after quickly skimming the words on the wall.

"It's just a poem about rain and harvest and stuff, Smart Guy. What's so interesting?"

He did expect it to be something that could help them—help him—with their little ancient mind demon problem. However, this seemed like another ol' boring mythical historical record at best.

He was about to mask his disappointment with his tried and true method of continuing to tease his twin's excitement over written words, but Stan was forced to stop in his tracks when he saw the way Ford stared at him.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

Ford's brows were knitted tight, his eyes wide, and the color all but left his face. On the face that mirrored his own, Stan saw…

Fear.

His brother looked at him like he was scared.

As panic from not knowing what was wrong started to creep up under his skin, he tried not to pull up something reflective to check his own eyes. Instead, Stan forced a nervous laugh out of his throat.

However, the way his twin visibly flinched at the sound shut him up real quick.

"Come on, you are freaking me out, Sixe—"

In a blink of an eye, Stanley wasn't looking at his brother anymore.

He was instead looking down a barrel of Ford's sci-fi gun.

"What—the hell's your problem!?" Stan shouted, but the anger in his voice couldn't hide the confusion and panic he felt.

His gaze switched between the weapon and his brother. The jerk was already on his feet, his face walled up and expression blank.

Stanford answered him with a leveled, annoyingly calm voice, a voice that told Stanley his brother was about to shatter their well-crafted feigned ignorance…

"We lost the stone in the woods."

The six-fingered hands strengthened its hold on the gun.

"My brother is talented in many ways, but *Tai Noi* script is not one he would know off the top of his head."

Confused, Stanley turned to look again at the carving.

Now that he paid more attention to it, it was indeed not English as his brain tricked him to think. Nor was it the same as how he's seen modern Thai language to look like. It was older, and he for sure should not know what it said.

Fuck.

The coldness of the floor suddenly did not matter compared to the chill that ran up his spine. Stanley almost didn't feel a lasting tingle at his fingertips when he pushed himself off the floor, when his priority was to put some distance between himself and the gun.

What escaped his notice was Ford's soft exhale when he got up, as the multiversal wanderer shook away the past image of his six-figured hands pointing another gun at his brother's kneeling form.

His eyes returned to his brother, now knowing what set him off. Stan felt his heartbeat in his throat, his mind frantically grasping for an explanation, something to tell Ford that this is a drastic overreaction—even with all that has been looming over and brewing under them—and came short.

All that left his mouth was:

"… Stanford, put the gun away."

"No," his twin rebuffed.

Stanford kept direct eye contact with Stanley, his eyes analytical, but behind it, the paranoia that had been present for months had taken the wheel. In their limited illumination, the bags under his eyes were unfortunately obvious.

"You might not be Stanley at all. If I shot your vitals, are you going to turn into a tiger?" Ford's voice was low, but a whisper echoed in the cave. He talked as if musing to himself more than addressing the other. "Or would it be something worse?"

"Ford, come on—"

Stanley started to approach, arms coming up in a pleading gesture. His voice was desperate but laced with frustration. How could he not when he knew exactly what his brother was talking about, but also knew that what was happening was something else entirely.

It made sense that Ford would not listen, but he still thought it was pretty unfair the smart guy went straight to the gun without even negotiating first, so sue him.

Before he could have finished his sentence though, Stanford moved and knocked the flashlight out of Stanley's hand.

Curses left his mouth. Another unfair thing will always be how hard his brother can hit him now.

"Don't. Come any closer." Ford emphasised his words carefully and with intent.

Stan still noticed his hands were shaking.

"OKAY! Okay. Just… hear me out for a sec," he pleaded, with both hands up in the air. Stan needed Ford to not shoot him, and if taking a step back was what it'd take, he would relent.

“I have an explanation—” he started, paused when he remembered he didn’t know what’s up with the language thing he had going on either, and continued. “Well, something sort of like an explanation…”

Ford looked at him, his identical weary brown eyes gleaming with mistrust, but he still did not shoot that sci-fi gun of his yet. Stan took that as his brother willing to hear him out.

Well, now—if he just knew what to say.

The nerves got to him.

After a moment of awkward silence, Stan exaggeratingly shook the hand that got hit when Ford disarmed his flashlight.

“Jeez, ouch, that was one hell of a hit.” A dry laugh accompanied his bad attempt at levity, although the only reaction he got was Ford’s unamused face.

Stan wanted nothing more than to scream. He almost did it, he almost keep it together for the whole trip. The fact that it was a moss-covered slap of rock that tripped him over added to his frustration.

He didn't know what to say, what lies to come up to deescalate the situation…

Inhale.

Stan chewed on his tongue. He could feel Ford’s patience running thin in the way his brother’s hands tighten around the gun.

Exhale.

No easy way out left for him to take.

Truth.

Well, he could start at the most important part:

“This… This is not because of Bill.”

Ford frowned. Whatever he had expected his brother—or whatever he thought was wearing Stan’s skin—to say, what he heard did not help ease his worry. Stan still got the gun pointed at him.

“What—”

“Listen, okay? I know you are worried about him, but this it not it,” Stan continued, “I've been keeping track, and he's only been able to influence me when I slept. And this is not, like, I don't think this is—”

“What do you mean ‘*you have been keeping track*’?”

Something cracked through, and suddenly Ford’s voice was tired and befuddled all at once. Stan would have laughed at his brother's owlish expression… if the surprise didn't hurt a little bit.

Stan huffed.

“*Yes, Ford.* I know what had been going on with my own head. Pull those eyebrows down,” he said, rolling his eyes.

The accused reached into his pocket and pulled out his own journal, before tossing it to his brother.

“Give me some credit.”

As Ford caught the battered notebook, Stan realized too late he failed to hide the bitterness in his voice.

Well, it has been a while since he *really* feel like his brother had underestimated him. Stan intentionally hiding the information or not.

Ford finally lowered his gun and Stan finally got a good look at the thing… Something in him relaxed when he saw that it was set to stun.

Ford did not put it away, however, and Stan did not fault him for still wanting some kinda safety net. As he sat down to get better lighting, Ford instead put the gun besides him—where he could easily reach and his brother couldn't take it—and started going through Stan’s log, while the notes’ owner continued talking.

“I knew…*something* was happening, to my head—my memory, your behavior, a lot of things—” Stan closed his eyes and remembered when Ford first mentioned his concern about Stan’s new memory problem. “I did think it was scary as hell, you know that, but not like I was a stranger to medical problems, you know? What's one more?”

“And hey, not that I wasn't a stranger to not remembering stuff either.” He shrugged, and with his eyes still closed, Stan missed the way his brother’s face crumbled. “But then your fear got…*weird*.”

He chuckled a bit, dryly. “Not that you ain't a paranoid bastard normally, but we have been doing *fine*. You told me things since we started sailing, but this problem, you… didn't.”

Stan opened his eyes to look at his brother, his hands fidgeting nervously as he said. “That's the first sign to me that you don’t think what I got was natural. It's easier to put things together after that.”

Ford avoided his brother's eyes by burying his own in the notes.

“Especially after you started writing in some weird new code I didn't recognize—” Stan's words stopped Ford’s hand that were turning the pages. He continued, however. “—I knew you tried to hide from him.”

“And it's not like after figuring things out, the triassgular tried to hide it,” Stan bit out. “The memories…I know he’s messing with ‘em. Messing with me—”

The mocking note he left, the way his brother’s pain returned, and that fucking song that makes Ford jump out of his skin, no matter how hard he tried to hide it…

“—Messing with you.”

Stan took a deep breath; saying all this when he thought he could have lied his way out of it at the start was already like pulling teeth, he couldn't let those memories bother him now.

“So, yes, I have been keeping track of what influence he could have. I know you have been trying to find more ways to get rid of him with every supernatural force you could have asked. I have too,” Stan sighed. “No better luck, though.”

He wished he could punch the triangle again, he should get to, if the bastard was squatting in his head.

Still…

“But I don't know how the language thing happened,” Stan said, gesturing between the writing on the wall and himself. “It kept flicking on and off in my head. It happened since I put that space rock in my mouth… might’ve been because of Bill’s weird power or whatever, but I’m not him.”

He just didn't know what else could it have been. Stan just hoped Ford believed him.

His brother continued to silently read.

Stan always felt that silence was suffocating, not much around his brother anymore, but it sure as hell was now.

He, like the salesman that he was, decided to throw in an offer, hoping his desperation would seal the deal.

“You can check my eyes if that would prove it, you said he can't hide that if it's him in control, right?”

With that, Ford finally looked up from the notes. Either he finished skimming them, or Stan raised a good enough point to gain his problem-solving-focused attention. There’s still skepticism and doubt in his eyes, but mirroring in his twin brother's, a desperation to believe.

Stanford took a moment before moving to retrieve the discarded flashlight, and glanced to checked for any damage. When it still worked without problem, Ford reluctantly went over to check Stanley’s eyes.

They were as normal as can be.

After some fast blinking to readjust from getting light shined directly into his eyes, he watched as his brother processed this new information and how it slowly formed an answer in his head.

Stan watched Ford's whole body seem to unravel.

From the way his tensed shoulders finally dropped, to the way he exhaled the breath he had been holding in anticipation of the yellow-tinted eyes.

Especially, in the way a weight Stanford had tried to hide since the beginning final showed itself in all the lines on his face.

He looked tired. Stan was sure he looked the same.

“Why didn't you tell me?” Ford asked after a moment

“Same reason you didn't tell me, dumbass,” Stan shot back immediately.

“Stanley—”

“What?” Stan huffed defensively, but his heart was not in it. “I thought I could handle this.”

“That's—” Ford sharply inhaled. The way his twin tried to lower his raised hackles already told Stan that Ford knew exactly what he about to say was extremely hypocritical, but would say it anyway.

“That’s incredibly reckless and arrogant of you to think that,” Ford said with a sigh.

“Look who's talking.” Stan couldn’t help but point it out, small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“More reasonable for me to think that than you, Brainiac. It's *my* head.” Stan puncture the point with a soft punch to his twin’s shoulder.

Ford huffed, his frown showed a conflicted feeling between an angry lecture from his incredible worries for his brother, and an angry lecture from the way Stan implied that he didn't know how to fight his life-long nemesis. Stan braced for both.

But then Ford turned to look at him, and gave his twin’s shoulder a punch back. Before he answered, with a tired but light chuckle in his voice. The kind of chuckle that carried an implication that Stan’s method did cheer him up, even if it's not much in the grand scheme of things.

“… now that's just childish.”

The scolded old man bumped his shoulder to his brother's, and shot back, childishly.

“Shut your yap.”

As the conversation paused and they sat shoulder to shoulder, Stan thought to himself optimistically; he avoided getting shot, and Ford seem to get cheered up by his antics again. Now, they can just put this behind them and find a way forward…

But his gut feeling told him Ford have more to say, so, he braced still.

“… If you had told me you knew,” his brother finally said, just before they could fully settle into the silence, “we could have found a way to get rid of him together. I wouldn't have had to walk on eggshells trying to keep it secret when it wasn't.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Stan shrugged, he didn't really regret trying his best to keep Ford safe, especially since: “Could have said the same thing to you, y'know?”

He aimed for a lighthearted jab, but he mentally kicked himself when he saw Ford’s serious expression.

“That's not the same,” and before Stan could interrupt—offended by his fellow hypocrite—Ford continued.

“I was trying to keep Bill from knowing the crucial information of my plan to get rid of him. It was a strategic move, Stanley.” As the words come out, the calm voice made way for the remnant of panic and frustration that Stanford has been trying to keep in check from the start.

And before he knew it, Stanford stood up and started pacing.

“If you already knew, it was all for nothing! He could rifle through your memory to get the information, if not immediately then eventually. If you had let me know, we could have combined our efforts and come up with a better plan, or find a way to at least make sure he’s not hurting you! I could've run tests, tried to set up a ward, anything, to help keep him in check with your help. I could—”

The words started to change from lecturing his brother into low mumbling to himself, before ending in a horrified and saddened whisper.

“… The secrecy has been ineffectual at best and a disaster at worst from the start.”

The pacing stopped, and with his back leaned on the cave's wall, Ford slowly sat down on the ground. The support of the stone was the only thing to keep him from collapsing like a puppet with cut strings.

Both of the six-figured hands came up to cover his face, as the scientist let his conclusion echo quietly.

Awkwardly, Stan watched his brother's spiral. He want to be angry—or offended at what he heard to be he did all this for nothing, something easy to reach and put up instinctially, but he didn’t have the heart to be angry at his brother. The guy laid out his very sound reasoning, and the conclusion Ford came to was right. He tried to argue his case anyway.

“He wasn't—I…urgh. Look, it's just…I just…”

As words failed him again, Stan decided to just give up, in the spirit of the truth.

“…I don't want to worry ya, Ford. This was supposed to be another dream come true trip. Traveling the world together, finding treasure and all that.” He sighed, his hand came up to rub his temple tiredly, and before Stan could stop himself…

“Sacrificing myself was supposed to stick.”

Ford snapped his head up to look at him. Stan wished that he bit off his own tongue before he let that slip.

The sentence hung in the air between them.

Stan refused to say more.

From the look of it, Ford had ten different things he wanted to say, but everything fell short of an appropriate response.

They both ended up sitting there for a while. Ford’s back to the wall and Stan on the opposite side, under lantern light and on a cold stone floor. The silence did not suffocate Stan as harshly as before, but it was far cry from a comfortable one.

And just before Stan was about to flee like a coward with an excuse to check if the rain outside had stopped, Ford broke the silent with a frustated, desperated whisper.

"*Damn it all*, I thought we were past this."

"What?" Stan curtly asked.

"*This!*" Ford gestured to the air, his mind having more thoughts than he could put into words immediately, before settling with: "All the secrets, and the worrying and *not talking to each other.*"

"Hey, that's on you and and your paranoid brain," Stan said with no real bite to it, before continuing sarcastically. "My problem is only this one thing. I did a fantastic job communicating otherwise."

That got a strained laugh outta Ford. Stan secretly took it as a win.

"I beg to differ," Ford said, still sounding exhausted but voice a bit lighter. Before switching to a solemn tone. "Mabel would be deeply, deeply disappointed."

Well, that's an effective threat.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever. If I'm going down, I'm bringing you with me, by the way."

Ford's small smile at his nonchalant bluff annoyed him. Although, they both knew that if the kids managed to get all this mess outta them later, they will definitely omit this part of the details. No use worrying them with two old men's problem, even if they were kids who survived apocalypse.

Stan reached out his hand, and Ford gave back the notebook. As Stan put it back into his pocket, he asked his plan-oriented brother, "Now what?"

Ford looked at the direction of the cave's exist for a moment before answering. "Well, we still have to wait for the rain to stop—"

"Not what I meant, Six," Stan deadpanly interrupted.

Ford rolled his eyes, but still gave Stan the answer he was actually asking for.

"My best lead was Xólotl, but that trail has gone cold. I was hoping to find an alternative on this side of the world," he said it with a pained tint in his voice, "but nothing has come up that's substantial enough."

Stan thought for a moment, turning over what Ford said in his head.

"…We could still—"

"No."

"I haven't even—"

"If you are talking about your plan at the end of your journal, no," Stanford argued adamantly. One of his hands pointed at his brother to emphasize his disagreement.

Stan did not back down easily either, however.

“It might be the only way, Ford.” His voice resoluted, Stanley Pines always found the courage in protecting his family. “And it's not like we haven't made that sacrifice before, this one will just have to be…cleaner.”

“I said—”

<Apologies to interrupt>

A voice, soft but icy sharp, rang out from the darkness of the cave.

Both of them jumped to their feet as quickly as men their age could have done, and pulled out their weapons just as fast.

The flashlight was employed again to point at the direction of the new arrival. When the light illuminated the unexplored part of the cave, the twins were faced with a gargantuan serpent.

The light reflected off the emerald hue of its fish-like scales, turning into an iridescent radiance onto the cavern’s wall. The golden, horned head of it loomed over the Pines, observing them with its spherical, dark eyes that made both of them feel like a deer in the headlights.

It ‘spoke’ again, unnervingly from its mouth full of sharp teeth…

<…but you two were being really loud, and I want to sleep>

….

What?

“Well, uhh, we didn't know there was a big ass snake in here!” he snapped at it.

Being rude now might not be the best course of action, as the creature was clearly magical and seemed like a tough fight. Not like he cared—Stanley Pines had always been loud—but he felt the need to point out that they did not know about the cave’s occupant anyway.

Although, it seemed that only he felt the need to defend their long and vulnerable brotherly talk to a snake, as Ford turned his puzzled look at him.

The serpent—as much as its reptilian face could express—appeared disgusted with his answer, in the way someone would when hearing a bad or crude joke.

<Rude. No one teach you manners? Our ass is fine>

Stanley blinked.

“That's not— what?”

“Stanley.”

Grateful for his brother for interrupting his spluttered thoughts of ‘do snakes have asses or was it making fun of him?’, Stanley turned to Stanford, whose puzzled look got more owlish by the second.

Stanley silently mouthed ‘what’ at his brother, gesturing at the serpent, indicating to Ford that he was busy.

“What did it say?” Ford asked.

Oh, right. The translation thing.

“It said we are being loud,” Stan answered, and it seemed that whatever translation it got, the serpent did not like what it heard. It straight up hissed at them.

<‘it’?>

“Oh, it did not look happy,” Ford observingly pointed out.

“Ya think?” Stan deadpanned back, before turning again to the mystical snake. “Okay, uh, let me start over.”

Stanley introduced himself and Stanford to the creature, and per his brother’s ongoing request in their travels for him to be more polite with strangers, he figured this was a good time to oblige. It was not much classier than his normal schtick, but as this was a giant snake in a very tight space, he figured being nice would buy them some time if things did go wrong.

While he did that, Ford—who finally put away his gun—took the time to actually observe the serpent in front of them. His eyes traced over their intricate golden horn with wave-like patterns engraved, the fin-like frills along their form, and golden archaic jewelries…

“You are the Naga in the mural…” Ford verbalized his realization. A spark of excitement suddenly appeared in his eyes.

“My brother said you are the Naga that was carved into the wall, I'd guess you're also the owner of the place?” Stan pointed his thumb to the mentioned mural and asked the Naga for confirmation, which they were happy to do so.

<Yes, this temple was dedicated to me.>

<Although, it's been a long time since someone's shown up here.>

Not waiting for Stan to translate the confirmation, the moment his brother started nodding—an indication that he was right, Ford immediately asked his favorite thing to say:

“Would you mind some questions?”

Stan fought off the urge to face palm. Instead, he opted for a shouted-whisper in his brother’s ear.

“Ford, we kinda have other problems going on…!”

However, for a creature with no visible outside ears, the Naga themselves seemed to have incredible hearing in this echoing cave.

<*He says what?*>

They asked, crooking their head curiously, and Stan couldn't help but sigh.

“He just wants to ask you his nerd questions,” he explained, while ignoring the familiar offended but resigned ‘hey!’

The Naga seemed amused, although their next question was genuine.

<*Hm, is one of them about Xólotl?*>

Stan decided that this creature seemed to like catching him off guard, but this was an excellent surprise.

“You know Xolotl?” Stan asked, now as excited as his brother.

They nodded.

<*We know of his twin. Quetzalcōatl is a friend.*>

For a creature with the body of a giant snake, reptilian face, and sharp, protruding fangs, their smile in the moment—Stan decided—was quite kind.

“They know Xólotl?” Ford asked his brother, as he was not included in this multilingual conversation.

<*We may be able to help with what you are looking for.*>

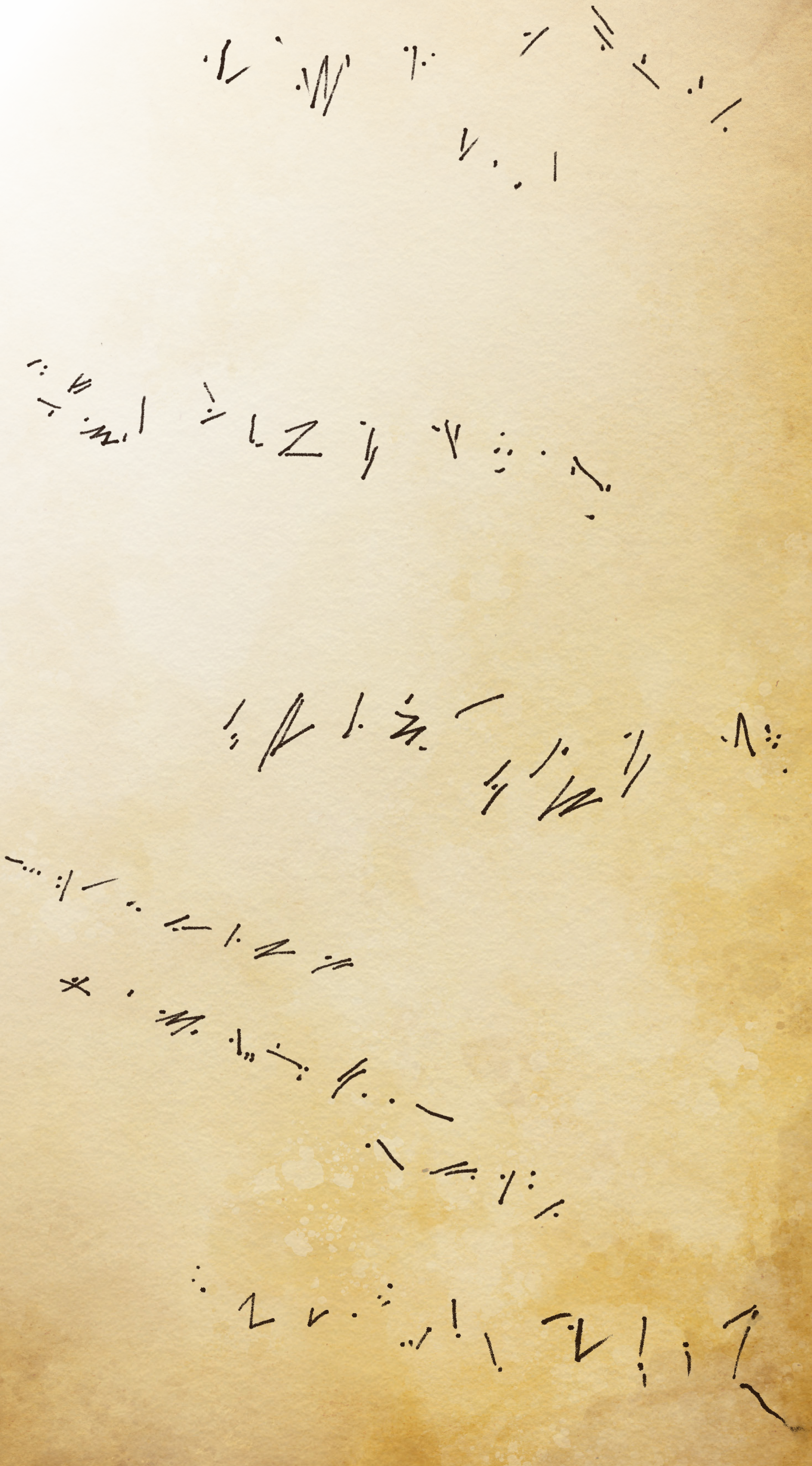
Stan turned to look at Ford with a big smile and a twinkle in his eyes. A joyous, relieved laugh barely contained.

“Oh, you gonna love this news, Sixer.”

* * *

The rain continued to fall throughout the night, although, it did not feel as cold in the hidden cavern as it did before.

When the dawn broke and the sunlight hit the forest’s leaves, the Pines brothers left the cave with a plan, a new charted destination, and hope.



We've had a breakthrough!

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nice way to say you pointed a gun at me

The temple turned out to be the right call… in some ways. We managed to secure valuable information from the mystical being known as 'Naga', thanks to Stanley's apparent ability to communicate without further need of the Rosetta Stone.

And since *I'm* the one who actually talked to 'em, it's only fair I get to record it. No sense on pretending anymore, eh?

Turns out we have to go all the way back to Mexico. Figures. Not only is that Xólotl guy slippery as an eel, but it seems like it's our only shot at getting rid of our damn stowaway.

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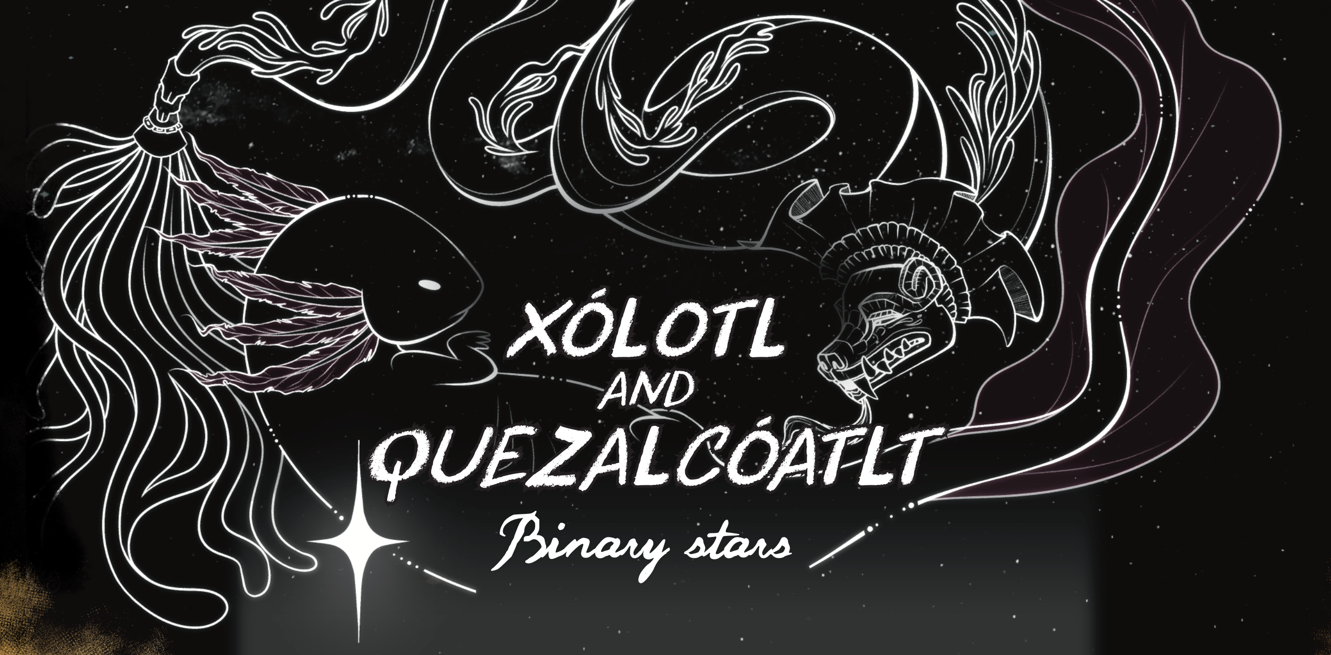
We WILL.

… Okay.

That is not all, however, because unexpectedly, it seems like Xólotl has a—

TWIN!



XÓLOTL AND QUEZALCÓATLT

Binary stars

Who knew? I'd say it's fate if it didn't feel like a bad joke. Reliable method tho, if you can't get someone's number, just ring up his twin and voilà! ϟ⛵ 🗡☠#$⛵⛵*$# ☽$!?🗡 ✋✗☠ #🌲$** ⛵💣✗⛵ *Easy peasy.*

So Xólotl has a twin, right? His name is Quetzalcóatl. A friend of Naga. Very into creation and life and war and blahblah-blah. A bunch of things that aren't important, *For now!* but that are a big deal for everyone who knows him. Xólotl is actually the less popular twin, and nowadays he just goes here and there while Quetzy 🌲✗&★?☠ ☽$, 👓💣✗⛵? is busy with the big shiny stuff. Might be why we're having a hard time finding him in one place.

Naga says that we need to find their buddy and ask him to get his little brother to help us. And for that, we only need to get to a highly populated tourist zone and hope that he takes us seriously enough to even show up.

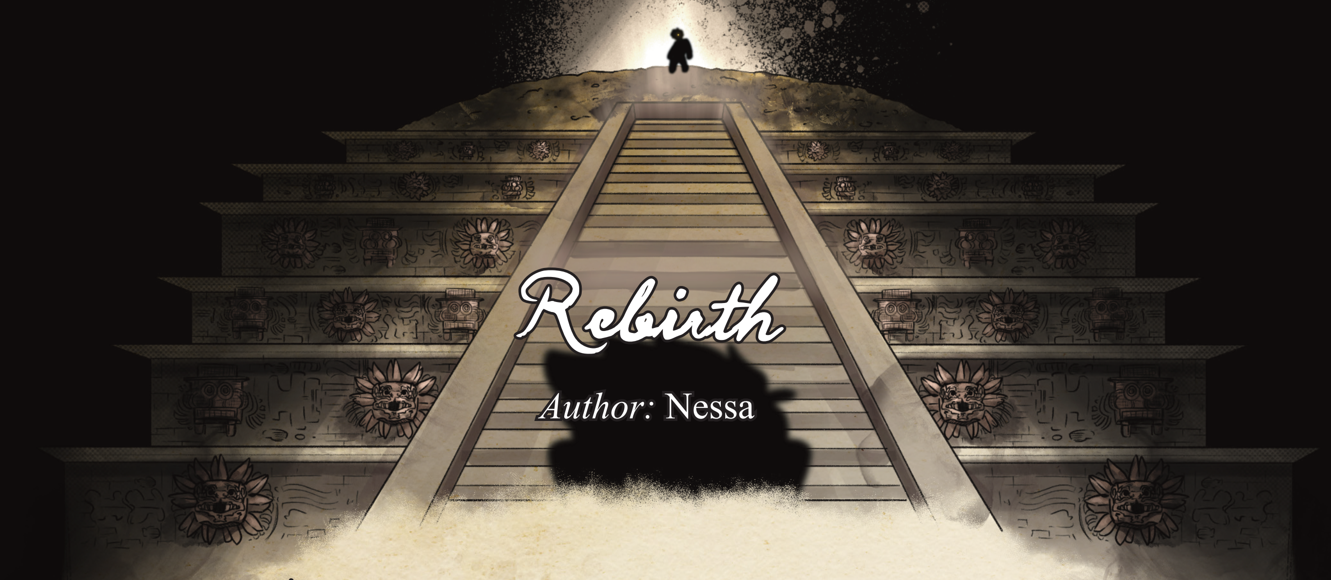
Why *HE* cannot help us with our problem? Hell if I know. Gettin' real tired of jumping through all these stupid hoops, "maybe you'll find out in Thailand" this, "maybe back where one of your exes lives" that, all to end up in almost the same place we started. Guess there must be a reason why the "worse" out of the two is the one who actually scares Bill. Ha! It's almost ironic.

According to the Naga, Xólotl is the one of the pair who holds domain over twins as well, so it is possible that knowing of our case will make him especially receptive of our plight. It would seem he's also quite familiar with death—and rebirth—so if there's someone well suited to know how to make sure we get rid of Bill for good, all the signs point to him.

Thing is we're not entirely sure that those guys even talk to each other, let alone get along enough for them to be asking favors from each other. From all the gossip we've heard from cryptids here and there, it sounds like they have a rocky relationship at best... Would be just our luck, that the only lead we have amounts to nothing.

I loathe to rely on the good will of higher beings, but perhaps our encounter with the Naga is an auspicious portent. We need only to reach our destination in time.

So back to Mexico we go!



Rebirth

Author: Nessa

There's a thrum beneath Ford's skin, his heart pumping blood at an accelerated rate as restless energy gathers in his fingertips. Paralyzed over the bed, his eyes drink in the blurry shadows, an exhalation stuck in his throat with the anticipation of *something* amidst the singing of the crickets.

Something's not right.

He seeks reassurance in the familiar sight of Stanley sprawled over his own bed on the other side of the tiny room, but his eyes find no silhouette to tether themselves to, only empty sheets.

His heart jumps into his throat at the same time that he shoots out of the bed, ignoring the shudder that overcomes his body with the action—it's a natural reaction from his body making contact with the floor's cold tiles, he tells himself, it has nothing to do with the nausea crawling up from his stomach.

"Stanley?"

The crack in his voice is loud in the silence before dawn, no joking remark disguising it. But that doesn't *have* to mean anything; perhaps his brother was simply in need of a breath of fresh air. The stars know neither of them have been able to achieve consistent sleep in their race against time. Renting a room in the inn they're currently staying at was only deigned a necessity because neither of them were lucid enough to start a search in the middle of a dark forest—and, if Ford has to be honest in the privacy of his own mind, he's fairly sure that the sleep deprivation would have worsened his *very* justified paranoia of present.

None of that logic helps keep the chills at bay as he steps outside, boots and coat hastily thrown over his sleep clothes as his eyes take a moment to adjust.

Not one sign of Stanley, though that hardly *has* to mean anything. Perhaps he felt restless and went to ask their host for directions, or for a guide, as they didn't have much of a chance the previous night.

It would be reasonable, after all, to get a head start and be rid of their problem as soon as possible.

But Ford can't even believe himself.

"Damn it, Stanley…" he curses under his breath, sweeping the empty courtyard with his eyes once more—as if the person he seeks were likely to appear from behind the colorful tiles or the small statues of gods he's unfamiliar with—before rushing inside the room to pack the essentials.

There's more to it than simple disbelief—no more keeping things from each other, they promised. Stan wouldn't have left just like that, would he? Not when this is the most promising lead they have. Even with that other plan of his, he wasn't unwilling to try a better option first. Especially knowing what the alternative would do to his family, to *Ford*.

His brother is, remarkedly, not often cruel.

Which, unfortunately, leaves an arrangement of options on his whereabouts that are each less pleasant than the last.

One. He's truly just gone to find a guide or a map to ensure they don't get lost in the forest. Reasonable, but Ford trusts his instincts far too much to believe in what his senses already reject.

Two. He left on his own to try and find Quetzálcoatl in a misguided attempt to protect him. A more likely candidate, but when his fingers brush with all two pairs of Stan's shoes while checking that none of their belongings have fallen beneath the beds, he feels his stomach plummet to the ground.

This only leaves option three. Coincidentally his least favorite for a variety of reasons.

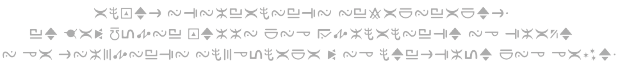
Because if Bill has taken over Stan completely, he's not only running out of time, but each second he's wasting pulling clothes outside of bags and pushing aside carefully folded glittery letters to look for flashlights and supplies is a second less that he can spend looking for a solution. Provided he can even find his brother first, although he has the feeling that that part won't be a problem.

If there's something Bill loves doing is gloating about his perceived victories.

He barely glances at the people starting to emerge from each door in the inn as he runs as fast as his legs will let him with a big backpack strapped to his back. Hardly the first time he's had to do so through this journey, but to the unknowing eye he most likely looks like an overeager tourist.

But it doesn't matter. Somewhere in the vicinity is Stanley. Or something that can help him. In the most optimistic of scenarios, both things are equally true, and Ford might not be the kind of man who leaves his luck in the hands of fate, but perhaps that is why he refuses to accept any other option.

He will find him. And he will find a solution. There is no other option. He won't allow another option.



Stan is no expert in out-of-body sensations—though at this point he can't say that he's not an expert either. A little hard to decide what counts and what doesn't when you barely remember most of it anyway, but either way, the one thing rising above his bubbling desperation and horrible helplessness is that this is *so damn weird.*

He hears his own voice coming from his own mouth, practically a perfect replica if it weren't because he doesn't sound nearly that obnoxious, he's sure. "That's hurtful, Fez."

Like hell it is. As if it wasn't *Stan's* body the one currently taking an impromptu hike through the forest in nothing but his bare feet and ill-conceived clothes, certainly not the kind he would like to be wearing when there's still no sun filtering through the leaves of the trees.

All of it feels… slightly muted, granted. Hard to say if that's a fact or just the disconnection he has from his own actions right now, but he can't help but remember the excited rambles that left an indent of ink upon the paper in Dipper's last letter—passionate speeches about ghost possession and the testimonies he had managed to find, case studies on people who had been at the mercy of strange entities for months or even *years.*

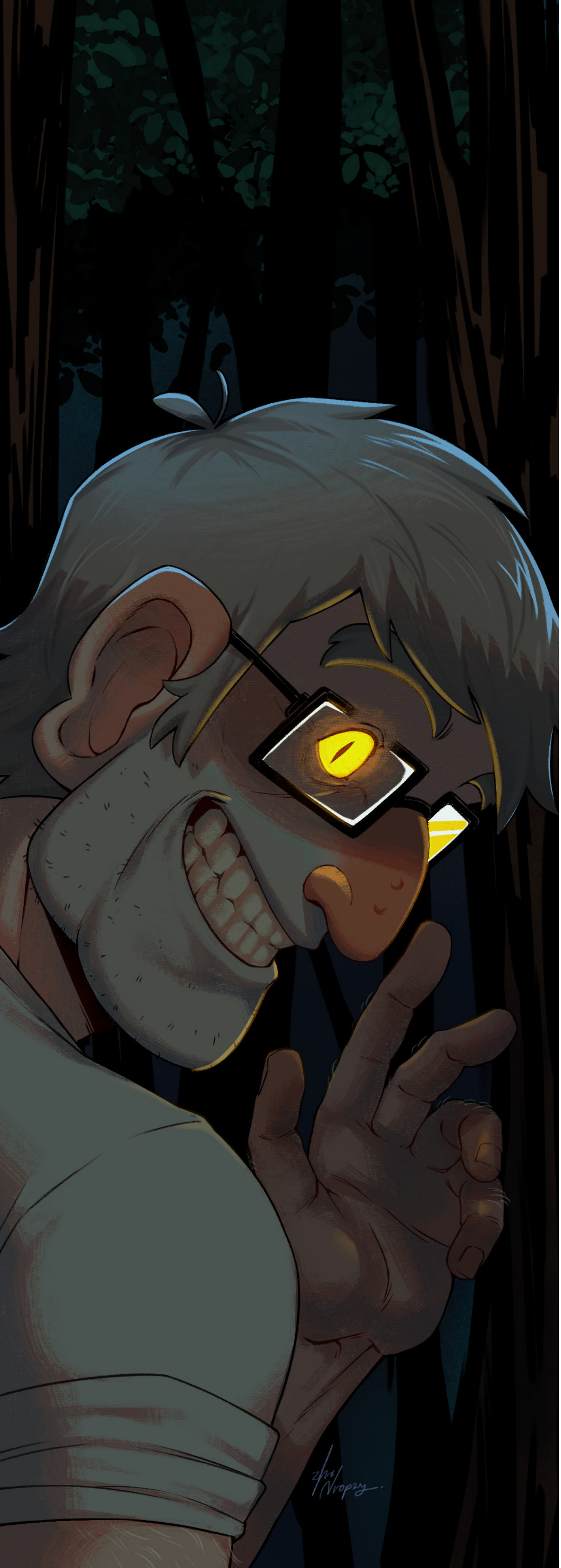
"Oh, well, it's not like it matters anyway! I got the wheel now, pal. All you can and gonna do is watch! I'm even generous enough to give you the front row seat!"

It could be tempting to simply decide that there's nothing else he can do, with little control of his body, and the annoying lack of privacy in his own mind when the only thing he wants is to put his thoughts together into something remotely resembling a good plan. He isn't even sure *why* Bill had to take control now, other than the evident delight that that oversized tangram piece seems to take on mocking him for how close they were to an actual solution.

His feet step down *hard* on the uneven gravel on the ground as soon as the thought crosses his mind. *Didn't like that one much, huh?* If Stan could roll his eyes now, he would do it, but he's sure that the sentiment comes across anyway, because the smile he can feel on his lips is unnaturally tight, even more than the regular amount that comes from whatever shitty attempt Bill thinks passes well enough as a human expression.

"I COULD be doing something else with your face, y'know? Like smashing it on a rock!"

Now, the bright side of being stuck with someone else inside your own mind, is that they're pretty much trapped with you as well. *That's a bluff,* and not because he couldn't actually do more harm than simply ensuring that Stan will hate long walks more than he already does, but because he has an objective, one that Stan hasn't quite figured out yet, but that has brought them here, to the middle of a dark forest, instead of doing something more immediately threatening. Besides, other



than the animals and insects around them, there's not one soul around, so honestly, *for whose benefit would that be?*

A forceful huff comes out of his lips.

"Oh, you want an audience? I can make that happen."

But he doesn't. No snap of his fingers and no straying away from the path for a dumb show of power. Nothing but the feeling of tension buzzing beneath his skin, not all of it coming from Stan himself. For all of his amusement and his little show of how much control Stan has lost through these months, there's something more important driving him right now, and it seems like he needs a physical, human body to accomplish it.

He needs Stan, and as long as that stays that way, there's still a fighting chance.

His steps halt.

"I could kill you."

And he could, it's true. Stan wasn't born yesterday. Even in a forest like this, not big enough for it to come with warnings meant to keep too curious tourists at bay, there is plenty in nature to kill any person. Better yet, he knows that Bill hardly cares enough about human life to be sorry if his were to be lost, aside from his petty need to make a spectacle out of it. There's something very important stopping him.

But ya won't. Because you need me alive.

Silence is his answer.

Silence and a sudden spike of

his heartbeat. But it's not fear what he can feel clogging up his throat. It's *anger*. He could laugh.

Bingo. He still has some cards up his sleeve.

The wet soil beneath Ford's feet mutes the sound of his footsteps as he rushes his way to what seems to be the heart of the forest. It's foolish, perhaps, to just run forward without any sense of direction, but he hardly has the time to find a guide he can communicate with, and even if he did, he certainly couldn't explain the situation with his brother to stress the importance of time.

He's fairly certain that he would be regarded as some kind of crazy foreigner if he were to say that he wants to establish contact with a god anyway.

Before he can reach the next line of trees, he makes a sharp turn and points his gun at an oak, holding it for a second before jumping onto the next rock and continuing on his way. It's hard to get rid of the sensation that there are eyes around him, and he's not fond of the idea of dismissing his instincts in these particular circumstances. There's no time to lose though, and until he can find Stanley, he can do little else but stay on guard and soldier on.

But it gets harder and harder to ignore the goosebumps on his nape that seem to disappear the very second he whips his head to look above his shoulder, or the whispers of the leaves moving at the rhythm of the increasing breeze that almost seem to murmur words that Ford cannot begin to understand.

Stan might have, if he had been here.

The thought makes it easier to ignore the burn in his calves as he pushes himself faster, never letting himself lose sight of any suspicious movement around him, nor miss any minuscule sound that could point to either his brother or an emerging threat. Most likely both at the same time, given the way in which circumstances have unraveled.

That's why it's such a start when he faces forward again after a quick glance around to check nobody is following, only to find himself face to face with a man who materialized out of nowhere.

"What the–" he yelps, pushing his boot into a rock with as much grace as he's able to avoid hitting the other person who, terribly unhelpfully, doesn't even move from his place.

There's no time to catch his breath before he's pointing the gun in the stranger's direction, even before his mind fully registers what he has in front of him.

By all accounts, *he* looks like a normal man. A little too impassive considering there's a weapon pointed at him, his eyes fixated on Ford with an inscrutable look.

"Who are you?" Ford barks, none too eager to face another difficulty on his way. The wind picks up around him, caressing strands from the man's hair and making them dance, all the while the conic hat upon his head stays untouched, just as unmovable as the small shells adorning his neck or the colorful folds of his clothes.

It makes no sense. It's physically impossible, in fact. But Ford has plenty of experience to call upon, and if decades of studies hadn't been enough, he has seen plenty in all these months traveling with Stan.

Slowly, he lowers his weapon.

The man's face remains unchanged.

"Quezalcóatl?"

It's the right thing to say. He's swiftly reminded of their latest higher being encounter when the man opens his mouth and a rumbling voice seems to swallow all the left over sounds in the forest, the wind calming itself as if it were listening to the words too.

Much like when they met the Naga, however, Ford finds himself frustrated with his inability to *understand* what's being conveyed. He does not speak the language, and with the Rosetta stone gone, his chances of managing to communicate successfully are slim.

But he can't *not* try.

"I…" Eloquence escapes him for once. He knows himself to be an ingenious man, with enough wit to have crafted several devices apt for each situation. But right now, even armed with a weapon of his own invention, he finds that his greatest instruments, his mind and his voice, feel insufficient. "I have not earned the respect from you to ask for anything."

For a moment, it feels like the world has been thrown into stasis, waiting for each tentative exhale out of Ford's lips.

"But Stanley needs your help," he starts, before shaking his head and trying again. "No. *I* need your help. I need to find Xólotl so he can help me save him, and you're the only one who can bring me to him."

He would rather not have to exert such honesty in the middle of a forest, no matter how vacant and silent it is at the moment, but he cannot allow his pride to trip him up once more. If they had found it within themselves to confide to one another before, maybe they would've had more time…

He grits his teeth. What's done is done. The only thing he knows is pride nor fear should get in his way anymore.

"We met your… acquaintance. The Naga? They told us to look for you. That if anybody would know how to find Xólotl when he doesn't want to be found it would be you."

Perhaps he should say more. Talk about their journey, the dozens of false leads and the common thread that brought them where they are now; explain why exactly it's so important that Bill doesn't take over Stanley for good, why that would be so bad for the world and the universe at large. Something *logical* and *solid* to make someone who has no reason to want to help him feel compelled to.

But for once, the only thing that comes out when he opens his mouth is the sum of all the emotions bottled inside.

"Stanley, he's my brother. My twin brother," the face in front of him remains impassive, but Ford doesn't let that deter him. With beings such as this, it's hard to tell if his plea is useless or not, and regardless, the original plan was *this.* It just so happens that Stan was supposed to be by his side when the time came. "I won't abandon him to be the plaything of a god. Please."

Quetzalcóatl looks at him with eyes that look far more contemplative than neutral. Ford doesn't even try to hide his desperation. *Let it play in my favor,* he thinks, *as odd as that would be.*

And it does.

Or, at least, it seems that way. It's hard to truly get the meaning of the exchange they're having right now when the words wash over his ears and pass him by as easily as the restored breeze. Besides, Ford isn't exactly the most skillful body language reader, and his instincts have already betrayed him once for trusting a higher being earnestly. It's pure hope, as much as he would despise to admit it out loud, what makes him believe without a second thought that what he sees in the other's eyes is expectation.

Like he's being tested.

His hands itch, the gun still held on a tight grip until he forces his fingers open and slowly lowers it down to his belt, never taking his eyes away from the being in front of him as he reaches for the belongings on his back.

There was only so much research they could do, pressed in time as they were, but what they learned should be enough.

Quetzalcóatl, an ancient god of light, and life. Knowledge and creation. The first star of dawn.

His hands find the mandolin strapped to his backpack and pull it over, telegraphing his movements so it doesn't come across as a threat.

The first notes he pulls from the instrument break the calm of the forest crudely. Ford tries not to wince at how inelegant it sounds—he should have practiced more, but there was no time with the almost literal ticking bomb they had on their hands—, willing his nerves to still so he can play like he would if he was taking his rest on the deck of their ship.

The manifestation takes a step forward. There's a spark of curiosity in his eyes. It's the only thing keeping Ford from breaking his clumsy attempt at playing music. At *creating* something in front of a god's eyes.

Try as he might though, he cannot force away the goosebumps over his skin, nor calm the heavier sound of his breathing as a low hiss sibilates around him.

He should be checking if there's something creeping behind him, slithering over his coat and bidding its time to grab him by the throat at the moment of truth. His playing turns unconscious, fingers moving over the strings and recreating the silly song that his grandniece had insisted would be the best start.

There's no checking if he's hitting the right notes when his ears feel overcome with the whispers of the leaves. There's no lowering his gaze when he cannot look away from the man who's no longer a man.

Inquisitive eyes have turned into sharp, elongated pupils swimming in a pool of yellow. Reptile eyes fitting for the serpentine snoop and the long body that now towers over him. In the place of scales, vivid feathers cover the length of what can only be described as a giant snake—a dragon, Ford might've said if he had been negligent on his research—and colorize the forest still devoid of any other living presence.

The creature opens its mouth, a sizzle in its forked tongue that could be words or the most innate of threats, and pushes its open maw towards Ford with an abrupt movement.

With barely a second thought to consider if what he's doing will incur the wrath of deities he barely knows a thing about, he tightens his hold on the neck of the mandolin and swings it towards the creature's head.

Mabel did say it was reinforced.

The sound of the strings suddenly being pulled all at once echoes through the shadows of the rising sun. When Ford can finally think past the adrenaline and the panic, he doesn't find a broken instrument—remarkably, there isn't a single scratch on the wood, not even on the *'Peas out'* sticker near the sound hole—, nor a bruised higher being with a righteous fury and a desire to make him disappear from this dimension.

If it weren't for the pinpricks on his fingers from holding the wooden neck too tightly, and the agitated cadence of his own breathing, he could believe that the whole thing was a fabrication of his own mind. He feels, by all means, frozen where he is, still pinned beneath those contemplative eyes.

After what feels like an eternity, the serpent opens its mouth once again in what almost resembles a pleasant smile.

And then it lunges for Ford faster than he can scream.

More and more rays of sunlight start hitting Stan's face as his body approaches the forest edge—*what was even the point of getting in there if they were going to end up outside of it again?*—and he would grumble more about his current inability to even frown to keep the light away from his eyes if he didn't know that it's on purpose.

An underlying bout of delight surges through his body the second the pyramids come into view in all of their *triangular glory*. Stan wants to snort. What a big-headed jerk. And that’s coming from *him*.

One last vengeful stomp over the sticks and gravel on the ground and then he’s standing over dry grass, contemplating the stone structures surrounding a path on the opposite side from where he is. There are specks of color moving over the dirt, barely visible between the glare of the sun and Stan’s current lack of capacity to squint, but he’s fairly sure that those are people.

Ah, hell. Did they trot through the forest for long enough for the place to be open for tourists? Ford and him planned to simply sneak in, and in a way that’s the same thing that he’s doing now—unwillingly or not—but the presence of other people nearby becomes much more of a problem with his ‘gracious’ guest leading the way.

“Please, the party hasn’t even started yet!” Does he sound like this when he’s trying to entice customers? Maybe he should tone it down a little so he comes across less as a maniac and more as a convincing entertainer, although… nah, he’s not that sloppy, it’s more likely Bill’s influence. “Oh, I’ll *show* you entertainment.”

It’s *weird* to feel the teeth of his denture grinding together when all he wants to do right now is laugh, but the mirth doesn’t last as he sees himself rapidly approaching the edge of the closest pyramid, and with it, getting closer to the early birds that decided to take a look to the zone first thing in the morning.

He must look deranged, still in the light clothes he put on to sleep—mindful enough of possible last minute departures not to get all comfortable in his pajamas, but still not the clothes anybody would wear on a hike—no shoes on his feet and a frenzied smile upon his face. The look of alarm on the closest woman tells him that it has to look bad.

As long as this doesn’t end up on the news… he would hate having to think about how to explain this to the kids without making them worry. And Shermie might think he’s experiencing dementia already.

“Kinda cute how you think you’ll get the chance to explain anything.” They’re already close enough to the woman for her to be able to hear the words, and if the way she looks to her right and left as if to find help or someone to alert says anything, is that he already screwed up his chances to seem normal.

Unfortunately, he moves far too quickly on tired feet for her to make a run to it before he’s all over her face.

“¡Hey, tú! ¿Quieres ser parte de un culto?”

The woman makes an aborted movement with her neck, as if she wants to look around still but doesn’t want to take her eyes off the crazy person inches away from her face just in case he does something *weird*. Smart.

“Huh. I… don’t speak Spanish,” a slight accent betrays the lie behind the excuse, but it seems to give her enough confidence to start taking steps backwards.

“No? English then? українька? ภาษาไทยล่ะ?”

The woman lets out a weak squeak. And… there she goes.

She's probably off to call the police or security, whatever it is she finds first. Stan barely has time to feel relieved about it when his body starts trailing behind her. The involuntary roll of his eyes that follows his line of thought feels gross—too purposeful to feel natural.

"Relax, Fez, we have more interesting things to do. We can afford to lose her."

Thought you wanted an audience. Not that Stan himself wants one, but he's not sure of what Bill is after this time and it's starting to unsettle him.

"Ha! That's the spirit. But you meat bags get scandalized so easily, it'll be a piece of cake!"

He's getting far too old to be walking so much without any breaks, but it would be far too much to expect an evil geometric parasite to care about that, so of course that's when Bill decides to start running to the South, the Pyramid of the Moon at their back as they make steady progress on the graveled road of the Avenue of the Dead.

"Did you know people here used this path as a symbolic walk of death?" The words come out jumbled and choked with his lack of breath. All the months running around might have helped improve his physical condition slightly, but this is already too much. The burn on his side and lungs is annoying enough on his own, but he has to listen to Bill babble on top of it? Hell no.

What, are you a nerd too, now? The words slip from his mind carelessly. 'Like Ford', goes without saying, even if Stan doesn't exactly want to call attention to his brother right now. Or ever. Especially not with the weird pang of both annoyance and excitement that the words cause.

"I thought you were documenting these things! I even left my own touch on your diary, did you like it? I'm sure Sixer did."

By now Ford has probably realized that he's missing, but whatever it is that he's doing, he can only trust him not to try and track him down without a plan.

Ford trusts him not to throw his life away without trying to fight first. And so Stan will trust him in turn.

His shoulders rise in an awkward attempt of a shrug while running, and finally, after several meters scaring the crap out of unsuspecting tourists and surely earning himself another ban that Ford will grumble about, they reach their destination—the one they had actually aimed for, before *this*. The Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent.

The statues carved all around the surface of it are warm to the touch, and for that Stan can only be grateful. In a few hours for now, they'll probably be burning hot, and neither his palms nor the soles of his feet would have appreciated that. The rock is porose enough for him not to slip as he climbs, but it's so completely unnecessary that he can tell that being unable to get rid of him for so good must be getting to Bill. Too much pettiness just for the sake of it.

The yelling doesn't wait for him to even finish climbing to the first platform, voices screaming about another stupid tourist (or a madman, or maybe just a regular American, he's pretty sure he hears someone shouting) who needs to be brought down before he causes damages to an important archeological monument. Delight causes a burst of energy to surge from his muscles, making it easier to grab onto the next rock.

His fingertips graze the stone just as the sunlight seems to dim. A cloud, surely. *About damn time.*

But a cloud wouldn't cause the angry yelling to turn into authentic screams of terror, and he can tell that even Bill is surprised about it, because his head turns quickly enough to give him a cramp. *Son of a—*

For just a second, he's glad that he's not the one in control of his body right now, because he's sure that he would have let go of the carving he's tethered to if he was.

Who could blame him, really, when a *gigantic* snake is approaching them with a strange amount of grace for its size.

Now we're definitely getting on the news.

And just when he thought he had gotten a hold of himself, he notices the figure holding onto the feathery body of the creature, looking exasperatedly determined for someone in that situation. But give it to Ford to make the most damn, dramatic entrance that he could have.

"Bill! Let go of my brother this instant!" *And* the most dramatic way to start a conversation.

His body finishes climbing with an acrobacy that makes his spine feel unstable, but Bill pays it no mind as he turns around to face the newcomers, a smug grin splitting his face. He's definitely happier than when Stan was busy goading him, that much is clear.

"Ahahahahaha! Fordsy! Quetzy! Finally decided to join us! And I didn't even have to go all the way up," he points to the top of the pyramid helpfully. "This is perfect!"

"We have no time for games," Ford snaps. It's hard to tell what his angle is, when there's no weapon in his hands to really make his threat substantial. Though he supposes that a huge serpent could be just as effective.

If they were dealing with anyone else.

"Nah, I think we have time for one or two more. Especially when you played right into my hands!" He steps closer to the ledge. The fall isn't significant enough to kill him, but it makes Ford tense even so. "What do you say?"

<Bill Cipher>

Stan's hand snaps his fingers. "The very same! What do you say, we could have something special here."

The serpent lowers down until the slits of his eyes are scrutinizing Stan with

such meticulousness that he squirms. He’s not sure if it’s due to his own nerves or Bill’s.

<You cannot continue this>

“And yet here I am! Come on. You must be *bored* waiting here all the time. They’re not even worshiping you right anymore! This place could use some better decoration.”

Images of cartilage and bones suddenly flood to Stan’s mind. Bile piles up on his tongue, and he must be a sight, smiling with sickness evident on his face, because he sees Ford tense up again.

“Just look at all of this! Perfect for two! Why not take advantage of it? A little alliance would spice things up.”

The serpent makes a contemplative noise, a low hum that seems to puncture the very air that Stan is breathing as its body draws near. Ford seems twitchy, like he wants to jump but something is keeping him from it. Probably how close Stan still is to the ledge.

<You have to give up the brother first>

Is the anticipation his? At which point do their feelings start merging together? And is that being insinuating what he thinks it’s insinuating?

“Ah! But where’s the fun in that?”

<I made a deal>

His head turns around, focusing on Ford once more, and then he lets out a loud cackle. “And here I thought you hated deals, Fordsy!” His brother frowns, looking vaguely confused at the words, but he merely clenches his jaw. “It’s a shame though. I was having fun, but if that’s what it takes, Quetzy, you got it!”

Finally. *Finally* Bill phases through the layers of his brain he had made a den in and he floats towards the serpent.

It has the unfortunate effect of all the energy on his body being zapped away, the exhaustion from the trek through the forest and the running and climbing finally catching up to him. He would have fallen if not for Ford’s reckless jump, colliding with him more than catching him, but making a valiant attempt at cushioning his fall with his arms anyway.

It still hurts like hell. “Ouch.”

From the corner of his eye, he sees Bill extending a fiery hand towards the serpent. A strange sight, given that serpents have no hands, but that must not matter much to higher beings. The sight makes his blood run cold.

“The sooner we get started, the better!”

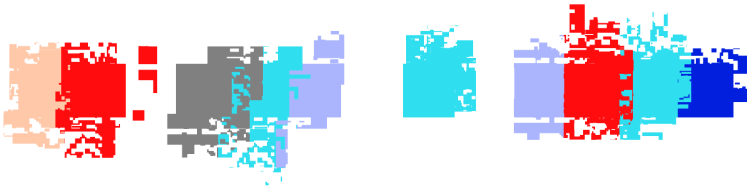
Quetzalcóatl looks at the hand for a moment. One instant too long that makes Stan’s vision flame red despite the dwindling light of the sun around them. One second in which he’s sure that they’re screwed and they came all this way just to make Bill’s twisted dreams come true.

But only for a moment.

<I’m not here to make an alliance with you, Bill>

“🟧⬛🟦🟥?! You just said you would.”

<I never said that>



Stan bites his lip. It’s no time to laugh despite the amusement in the serpent’s voice.

Bill turns red with anger, and he feels Ford tense where he’s pulling away from him, seemingly reluctant to let go completely, but unable to not pay attention to the main threat in front of them.

Can serpents shrug? He’s pretty sure he just saw a shrug.

“What’s happening?” Ford murmurs to him, his voice as tense as the hand he uses to withdraw the gun from inside of his coat. Ah, that’s where that went.

“They’re fighting.”

“What are they saying?”

Stan hushes him. If they want to figure that one out, they’re gonna have to listen.

<I merely said you had to let go of the brother. I never promised you anything.>

Another contemplative hum.

<I already do>

Bill laughs, shrill and hysterical. “Oh, please. This? This?! These are ruins. I’ll show you! I’ll show you what you could have!”

And he glides away, towards the first unsuspecting person that hasn’t fled yet at the sight of what by all means must look like the end of the world. A reporter, probably.

Nobody stops him.

They *should* stop him.

“Shit, Ford! Get up!” he hisses through his teeth, though the other is already halfway up and offering him a hand with a frown on his face. It doesn’t do much for the pain radiating through his body. “Fuck.”

“I don’t think you are in any condition to do anything right now.”

He has a point, he really does but… “Ah—I’ll live. Not like we have much of a choice. We got bigger fish to fry before we can relax.”

“Still,” Ford’s eyes are full of concern, but also panic and wariness as they go through him one last time. “I… got us some assistance. It’s hardly necessary for you to strain yourself.”

Stan takes a glance at Quetzalcóatl, impassively in place, watching the darkening sky without moving in a manner that should be ridiculous. He is, by all means, a giant serpent seemingly hanging out besides his temple for no discernible reason. But it has to be in his nature that the little air Stan has gotten back on his lungs catches when he looks at him.

He quickly averts his gaze.

“How did you even manage that?” he whispers furiously. “You can’t tell me you just happened to know the language?”

Ford suddenly looks very interested on the rocks beneath their feet.

“Ah, well. Let’s just say we found some… grounds of common understanding.” A perfectly reasonable answer, if he wasn’t getting a deep flush on the face.

Oh, he’s gonna have to squeeze that story out of him later for the kids to hear.

Just as he’s about to open his mouth to tease him a little—he deserves some levity after this whole ordeal, in his humble opinion—an angry roar rumbles through his ears, and an enlarged, red Bill comes back into sight. Ford throws one arm in front of him, but it does nothing to keep Bill from snatching him.

“◇⌶♉⩓ ╻△╻ ⊱⍑∃ ╻⍑?”

“Stop that! Let go of him!” Ford is properly pointing his gun now, but Bill is paying him no mind, his eye focused on Stan with such intensity that his own eyes start to burn with the effort to keep them open.

“Wha-?”

A hand hovers near his head, like that of a child ready to pick a candy from a bowl. Except Stan is not sure if he intends to make a grab for his brain or something a little less life threatening.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he says. Because he really doesn’t. It’s kind of a bummer, because making Bill look this frustrated because of

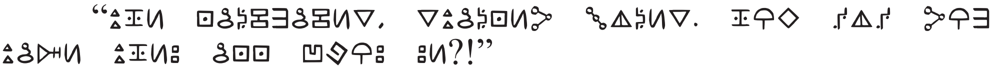
a personal plan would be only second in levels of satisfaction as the first time he got to get rid of him with a punch.

“Huh, I wasn’t trying to.”

“Give him back!” Ford yells from down below. They’re higher now. If he actually lets go now, Stan isn’t sure that he’s only gonna break a bone or two.

But because staring death in the face has never stopped him from voicing the thoughts deep in his head, he blurts out, “As far as I’m concerned, you’re the only one making a fuss about who knows what right now.”

He *feels* more than hears the howl Bill gets out.



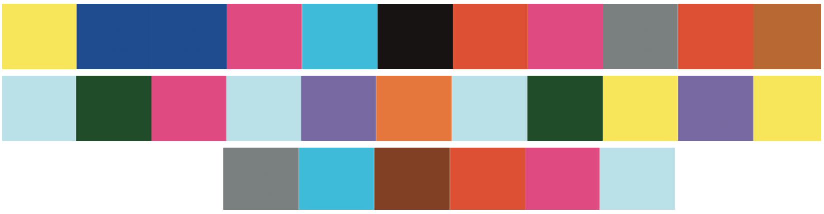
It’s only then that Stan realizes that Bill isn’t actually talking in any recognizable language or dialect that he’s ever known, not even in all the past months. His brain has gotten so used to filtering any possible words and symbols into something he can understand that he’s gotten used to not paying much attention anymore.

It’s hard to comprehend, the abstract manner in which Bill is communicating right now, and the sudden realization startles him. Did him licking the Rosetta Stone all those months ago cause this? It must have. Neither Ford nor him had time to figure out exactly how that worked, once the cat was out of the bag, but it seems like being out of his body has left Stan with all the cards, and Bill with nothing but the single one he already had, wherever it is that he comes from.

This time, his smirk is all his own.

“What? Don’t tell me you can’t get past a little language barrier?”

Bill *screeches.*



He’s starting to make good on his threat, applying pressure to the side of Stan’s head with a chorus of Ford’s protests and shots that just go right through the triangle until—

<Bill>

Stan lets out a sigh when that stops Bill on his tracks, surprise turning him yellow again. Or maybe he’s trying to look innocent on purpose. It’s hard to tell when they’re not sharing the same brain anymore.

Most importantly, it's only now, without the impending threat of a hand messing around in his brain, that Stan finally realizes that the sky has turned pitch black.

<Bill. I'm disappointed>

A giant axolotl seems to be floating in the sky, right beside Quetzalcóatl, who now exhibits a pleased smile. Can serpents smile? Maybe all the wear and tear is getting to him, because that really should be low in his list of priorities right now. The first thing should be how Bill's hand tightens over his body.

“⌶ИИИИ⊱! ɾ◬ɾ⍭'▴ ⊳⍭⍑◇ ⊱⍑∃ ◇И⟡И ⧖⍑◬⍭◬⍭⊟ ▴⌶◬▽ ᔓȣ⟡▴⊱, ᔓȣ⊡,” the cheerful tone sounds awfully forced. “◇⌶⊱ ɾ⍑⍭'▴ ⊱⍑∃ ⧖⍑◬⍭ ∃▽? ⦙ȣ⊱ᗡИ ⊱⍑∃ шȣ⍭ ⊟И▴ ⊟⍑⍑ɾ ⍑⊡ɾ ᕲ∃И▴ვ⊱ ▴⍑ ⊡И▴ ⊡⍑⍑▽И ȣ▽ ◇И⊡⊡.”

He's shaking. Stan is willing to bet it's not of rage, which leaves him more confounded than before.

The axolotl—Xólotl—shakes his head.

<You were making good progress, Bill. We were getting somewhere>

Bill turns red, looking as embarrassed as a being who emotes with one eye can be.

“▽⌶∃▴ ∃ᔓ! ⊱⍑∃ ⌶ȣɾ ⍭⍑ ⟡◬⊟⌶▴ ▴⍑ ⊡⍑ш⊳ ⦙И ∃ᔓ!”

Xólotl looks weirdly sad. Bill's trembles rattle Stan's body alongside his own; it's obvious that the completely calm response to his anger is upsetting him.

<You need more time. You'll get better, you'll see>

Before Bill can protest, Xólotl raises a hand. Like a magic trick, Bill is there one second and then he's not.

Panic doesn't have time to take a grip on Stan's extremities before gravity does. Closing his eyes is instinctive.

So much for not dying in the process. It's not really his fault, but he still feels bad for the scream of despair he hears from behind him, where Ford is still standing on the base of the pyramid.

But he never touches the ground.

When he dares to risk opening one eye again, he finds himself face to face with the giant axolotl, who's examining with what almost seems like… sympathy? Understanding? Kinship? That's ridiculous. Probably a product of the dizziness he's starting to feel.

<You've done well>

He's lowered down beside Ford with magic, or power, or whatever it is beings like these have, so gently that for a moment it feels like he's dreaming. His brother wastes no time on running towards him, fussing over him without paying any mind to the two giants looming over them. A novelty in itself, he's sure that his hands must be itching to grab his journal and start recording details.

But all his hands are doing right now is touching his head gently, checking for a concussion that he's thankfully not going to find. His eyes are completely away from Quetzalcóatl and Xólotl. Stan's aren't, though.

He sees them float around each other in a circle. A greeting. Or an acknowledgment. There are no words exchanged, not in a language that Stan could decode or in any he couldn't. Nothing more than the echoes of an old routine, a well oiled cycle that, he understands, have spun since long before Ford and him were born.

That will continue long after they're gone.

It's beyond them, really. As spectacular as their adventures have been, Ford and him aren't deities, nor do they want to be. But he sees an echo of familiarity in the way they regard each other. In the simple fact that they seemed to have been attuned to each other's call. In the inherent understanding between them before they settle their sights on them two.

A pair of twins looking at another pair of twins.

Quetzalcóatl steps forward, his sights set on Ford as his own twin fades away into the unnatural night of the sky. The shine of the stars brightens and opens into the blue sky that reigned over the firmament just an hour ago, returning the natural order of nature. There is no tearful farewell. They will find each other again. Always.

Stan isn't sure of why he knows that. Or why his eyes feel slightly mistier than usual.

The serpent waits until Ford finally deems Stan well enough not to disappear the second he looks away, and finally acknowledges his presence again. There's no shame in it. Though he supposes Ford has a tendency to be overconfident on his choices.

Enough for him to be the one to speak first.

"Thank you. I don't know how to repay you for this."

A low rumble starts on their ears, not painful, but heavy.

<Take care of him>

And then he's gone too.

It takes a while for Stanley to feel well enough to get up and descend through the stairs of the pyramid. By then, people have already started gathering, murmuring and pointing in their direction.

Ford is really not looking forward to getting forcibly kicked out of the area, but his muscles, strangely enough, feel like jelly.

"We should probably hurry up."

"Eh… you'll have to help me out. My feet are killin' me."

Ford's eyes brighten, reaching for the backpack attached to his back. "I brought your shoes!"

"Of course you did," Stan looks relieved, despite the grumbly words. "Still though, I'm not sure I can walk all the way back like this. That did a real number on me."

He has an arm around his brother's shoulders before his brain can catch up with his body. Not like he would have meant to do anything differently.

"Just lean on me. It's been a long morning, we can get back to the inn and figure it out from there.

"If we're not banned already," Stan groans, but there's a smile pulling at his lips.

It's really not funny, but Ford can't help responding with one of his own. "If we're not," he agrees.

They decide to walk to the line of trees, hoping that the whole 'a god or two might have been summoned to the premises for a couple of hours' will be enough to distract the authorities. At least until they can catch their breaths.

"Hopefully next year our cryptid trip will be less 'life-threatening events' and more 'calm and peaceful voyage through the sea,'" Stan grunts. "I'm getting a little too old for this."

Ford winces. "I fear it might pretty much come with the territory. We're seeking adventures, are we not?"

"Not *this* kind of life-threatening, no!"

"I think we may be done with that for good," he says. It's hard to believe. But he thinks he finally does.

His brother's huffs of effort by his side aren't pleasant, knowing the pain he must be in, but there's a weird relief in knowing he's there, solid and safe by his side. Completely himself.

Ford's voice softens.

"You're alright."

"Heh. So I am. Sort of, I could use a nap or two."

The mirth in their eyes when they look at each other feels fresh, new. Something born out of their newest hardship, all the more satisfactory because of it. There are things they still need to talk about, but right now, with the chirps coming from the trees and the sun warm over their heads, it's more than enough. Words are hardly needed for them to understand each other anyway.

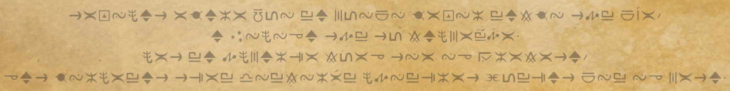
"I was right after all," Ford says after a while. "Unsurprisingly. I told you we'd find a way."

The other groans. "Yeah, yeah, don't rub it in, Poindexter."

"I'll try not to," he laughs. "For now, are you ready to go home?"

Stan smiles, and in that smile, with a denture that has seen better days, in that face, wearing dusty glasses that will gratefully accept a thorough cleaning while they set sail back to Oregon, Ford sees the echo of a toothy smile and shiny, excited eyes.

“Let’s go home.”



— Stop for more
pens and ink

- and snacks

— and snacks

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@vicartless (Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr)
VicArt Games (Itch.io)

ปุณ.Nropay_ *(He/They)*
Spot Artist
Socials
@Poon_Nropay (Twitter)
@poon-nropay (Tumblr, Bluesky)
@Enro (AO3)

MOD TEAM

Cait
(She/her)

Writing Mod
Beta reader
The Tricycles
Word Demon
The Soul

@iamtheunicornwizard
(Tumblr)
@tater_writes (AO3)

Thousand Springs
(Any pronouns)

Writing Mod
Beta reader
The Tricycles
Pizza Bringer
The Heart

@thousand-winters
(Tumblr)
@Thousand_Springs (AO3)

Tinglecannon
(She/her) and TC

Writing Mod
Beta reader
The Tricycles
Stan's Voice Consultant
The Mind

@Tinglecannon
(Tumblr, AO3)

Roo
(Yes/and)

Art Mod
Discord Mod
Graphic Mod
Codemaster
Assigned Furry
Unicorn Approved

@Kangaa__roo (Twitter)
@Kangaaroo (Tumblr)

Dee
(She/her)

Head Mod
The Right Hand Man
Writing Mod
Beta reader
Writer
Cait's Personal Handler

@0h_d3mon (Twitter)
@0hd3mon (Tumblr)
@ChaoticBisex (AO3)

Gray
(He/him)

Logistic Mod
Codemaster
Journal Writer
Journal Artist
Silly Guy

@grayvamp
(Twitter, Bluesky)

MOD TEAM

Enro

(He/They)

Head Mod
Project Manager
Art Mod
Formatting Mod
The Sleepless
Matcha Consumer
Hubris-fueled Moss Ball
Roo's Boss

@Poon_Nropay (Twitter)
@poon-nropay (Tumblr, Bluesky)
@Enro (AO3)

SPECIAL THANKS

Vic Kassian
for going along with
the Mod team's shenanigans

Final Thanks

Hi, I am Enro! (ปุณ.Nropay_) the main head mod of this zine.

This project has been such a passion and joy for me throughout the year 2025. I did not have experience modding zines before this, I came in blind just because I wanted to see my two favorite Grunkles sailing the world after the finale. It has been a learning experience every step of the way. It still feels unbelievable that it's done, and the zine is now real. I am not great with words, but this is my thank you to everyone who helped make this zine possible.

Endless thanks to the whole mod team for helping push this project to be better. Thanks for sticking with me through my problems and mistakes during the project, and thank you for helping me get through them.

Thank you to all the contributors, including those who could not stay with us until the end. It was because of your interest and willingness to participate that got this ship off the shore. I will be forever grateful for your contributions, this zine couldn't have become what it is now without everyone’s amazing work.

Thank you to all the supporters who always show interest in our project on social media, your support is always wonderful to see.

And thank ***you*** for reading.

The world is a vast and interesting place,

full of stories that want to be discovered.

Thank you for sailing on this journey with us.

May the love for stories and creation never leave your heart.

200+ Pages

40+ Encounters

(And more!)

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